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THE OLD TESTAMENT CALLING

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THE OLD TESTAMENT CALLING!

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FOR M,

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OF OMER.

I ENTREAT YOU THEREFORE

TO COME WITH BENEVOLENCE

AND TO PARDON US

FOR THOSE THINGS

WHEREIN WE MAY SEEM,

WHILE WE FOLLOW

THE IMAGE OF WISDOM,

TO COME SHORT IN

THE COMPOSITION OF WORDS

[*ECCLESIASTICUS: THE PROLOGUE*]

CHAPTER I

"As He spake unto our father Abraham, and his seed for ever."

We were in a tea-shop (no, not the Piccadilly Corner House, where the Jews congregate, for all the world as if it were their club, but in a tea-shop in Baker Street—Tig and I) when the Old Testament opened fire upon me, striking like a blast.

Whilst waiting in pleasant anticipation for our tea, there strolled in a Jewish family—mother, son and daughter. They had come to order chairs and tables and light refreshment for a bridge drive; and as I watched them, idly and uninterestedly, those words about Abraham and his seed seemed suddenly to be thundering all over the shop. It was as if in a second the whole thing was before one—deserts and wanderings—Red Seas and manna, and what-not. It was tremendous. And there, also before one, were some of the seed—in the flesh—in the shop—before the eyes of an astonished Gentile.

A Chosen People—God's spoilt children. I looked across at Tig, at the girls serving in the shop . . . "to the Jew first and also to the Greek," without respect of persons. Tribulation and anguish (in God's sight) to every soul that works evil; but glory and peace (in God's sight) to everyone that does good.

But in spite of that momentary turning away of

the mind to St. Paul, there remained the Old Testament, leaping out of the past, crying out its message : God hurling His power around and about His Chosen Ones ; challenging the universe, asserting His supremacy, striking right and left ; making shadows to crawl backwards, suns to stand still, seas to dry up. Yes, that was it ; the Old Testament is a preparation—the school of faith.

Without these clear and almost aggressive proofs that God could do *anything*, without this unwavering sight of His omnipotence, would anyone have ever listened to that other message of the New Testament ? That divine percolation of gentleness and holiness from God to the world—the school of charity—Christ ?

The mighty Jehovah and the sweet Saviour are but two aspects of God's love.

The miracles, and blessings, and chastisements of the Old Testament are one aspect : power. The Cross is another : compassion.

But always God is love.

It is as if mankind had first to pass through the arresting crash of supreme power to that other silent and unfathomable depth of God, in Christ.

The Bible is not a history of the world. It is folly to try to read into it what is not there ; and equal folly to miss what is. It is a record of God manifesting Himself to a Chosen People. It also records the birth of the spiritual soul of man.

It commences with Creation—out of nothing, something—God's immensity let loose—space—unthinkable, limitless.

How suggestive of God is space—a spilling over of His incomprehensibility—and a blazing forth into it of nebulous fires.

Stupendous to think of: Creation!

And by and by our own little ball was started a-rolling; paving the way for all our goings out and comings in—for the cosy home—the wandering desert Arab; such an all-embracing Providence gives one a feeling of security, a sense of well-being, as if one were personally being led by the hand to safety. Without it might we not feel a little unstable? This suspending in space, this twisting around, this racing along?

People nowadays are apologetic about the Bible. Is it not strange? For in a book which claims to be written under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, surely one would expect to meet something entirely different from oneself. And as far as that goes, one certainly does. God is not one of ourselves; neither are His ways our ways.

It is a perversion of reason to apologise for God. If we must apologise, let it be for ourselves. There is no need for anyone to try, as it were, to do the best for Him; to make Him ordinary and presentable; to find an inconspicuous and harmless place for Him among our self-sufficiencies. Yet that is the kind of sop given to the spiritual anæmia of the present day.

Strange, is it not, that people cannot believe in a wonderful God? And it is comic. And God knows it is tragic.

It seems like placing an incompetent and very helpless little finger over an irruption of omnipotent force. Need our feebleness decide the limit of His power? Does not the very weakness of the little finger indicate some stronger touch, and, in a measure, give the gauge of it? Can we not get down to facts, and realise our impotence? Can *our*

hands prop up the firmament? Or can we keep the universe from falling back into nothingness? In comparison with all that goes on, how little we *can* do!

The Bible has withstood many attacks of various kinds; both from those who would destroy it, and from those who would try to explain it, or make it more palatable. Perhaps the first is less deadly than the second; for it might prove difficult to destroy, although it can be so easily disfigured.

Certainly it wants a healthy mind, and a strong spiritual digestion to meet God in the open—to swallow the Bible whole, and feel none the worse for it. Yet, who would wish to be taken to a feast and given meat tabloids or digestive pills, instead of the delicious fare spread before one!

But apart from whether one believes or not, the Bible is delightful reading. The rhythm of the language is a poem, many of the names a joy—rolling sounds towards Eastern skies. There is, too, at times a gentle humour—unexpected surprises—glimpses of Heaven—and from first to last, oh! a wonderful companionship.

So these impressions will chiefly concern the Old Testament; that is to say, what I write will come to me through it; reading, and afterwards writing, what comes to me out of it.

When one opens any book, who knows how many thoughts one may find there other than those the book actually contains? The mind makes little excursions, and one may read many of one's own thoughts into it which, though suggested by the book, are irrelevant to it. Such thoughts seem as the book's particular message to the individual. I only hope I shall not weary you with all that comes

surging from its ancient pages to me to-day. However, you have been so patient with me for all these years (all those walks, all those talks !) that I cannot believe, for you, there can be any breaking-point now.

When we were very young most of us heard the stories of the Bible. They were as familiar as Red Riding Hood and Cinderella. And yet, did we not all feel there was something *special* about these strange Bible tales ? The eyes of childhood saw clearly—saw the touch of glory—as if across those stories, like a shining caress, the light of another world had fallen. Can we not recapture the simple direct views of childhood ; at least to the extent that *somebody* is going to do a great deal for us, seeing that we can do so little for ourselves ?

For, unless we can become as little children, perhaps there is going to be some difficulty over the Kingdom of Heaven. What a stripping away of self there has got to be before we are simple and pure enough to go straight to God. I must have been an uninteresting companion at tea that day. And I never explained to the Tiger that it was the fault of the "seeds" ; that they had opened up vistas, as they stood there before me—those proud and stiff-necked and rebellious ones—wanting at the moment chairs and tables and refreshments ; whilst all I wanted was to go home and read about them, which presently I did.

But I would like it understood I have no *purpose* in writing. I am not trying to convert the unbeliever, nor heading for controversial seas. I am merely happy ; and being of a sociable turn of mind, I want somebody to come along and enjoy themselves with me. I invite you. A spiritual frolic is a grand thing.

CHAPTER II

I

"And the Lord said to Abraham: Go forth out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and out of thy father's house, and come into the land which I shall show thee. And I will make of thee a great nation . . . to thy seed will I give this land."

Abraham and Sarah were no longer young; and they had no children. Yet this was the command Abraham received from God. How vague must have seemed this going forth to an unknown destination. What a wild-goose chase, seeking a land for his children, when there were none. What an upheaval! We all know what a move is; even in these days, with Harrod's to do the packing and motor-lorries to take the furniture. Besides, as a rule, we only move ourselves. We do not take with us, as Abraham did, innumerable relations, "and all the substance which they had gathered."

One can only hope those relations of his had not the same propensity for hoarding and collecting as most people—say, as Lindsey and the Tiger, who surely are, in this respect, the outmost point of the limit! How many camel-loads would it take to remove us three, I wonder? Our collections! Collections of china and curios; of bishops and saints (pictures only, we have no real bishops or

saints on the premises), of stamps, and match-boxes. The match-boxes picked up in the London streets for the most part—hundreds of different kinds ; the stamps collected by Lindsey since he was nine ; Tig's stamps ; and everybody's stamps ; for Fr. Dix and Fr. Craven. The curios and china, gathered by us from lands as distant as those where Abraham wandered. And these things only represent collections ; there is a considerable amount of heavy stuff besides such trifling individualities.

Yet, in spite of all impediments, Abraham obeys the command, proceeding to the south ; impelled to go, going so bravely. And as he went forward he built altars to the Lord ; wandering and resting awhile, then wandering on again ; and building his altars whenever God spoke to him.

During this great journey he received again another promise concerning his descendants ; that same promise which overtook me in the tea-shop, and which has so thoroughly entangled me in this joyous emission.

"And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth : if any man be able to number the dust of the earth, he shall be able to number thy seed also."

This promise came to Abraham as a vision in the night. He had been away fighting ; rescuing a kinsman who had unwittingly become involved in a quarrel amongst a quantity of kings. They had, as it were, taken this poor kinsman in their stride, and swept him along with them.

But Abraham had brought him back to safety ; and probably the reaction from the battle, the remembrance of it, made him restless, and sleepless, and despondent. Particularly did his own disappointment weigh upon him. He was childless.

"To thy seed . . ." But where were they?

He left his hot tent, and went out into the cool darkness. He strolled about, head bent, eyes cast down, feeling—well, one knows what it feels like when everything seems all wrong (what Tim and I call "feeling all blowy down your nose," a signal that prompt fussing and spoiling is indicated) and one knows, too, that having defeated all those royal personages would be no compensation.

Beyond a doubt, Abraham receives his caress from God; for, stealing through his depression and uneasiness, came the vision of His benediction: God was his protector, he need not fear; that protection was in itself a reward exceeding great.

Yet still his mind was full of perplexity: "Lord God," he cried, "what wilt thou give me? I shall *go* without children."

He lifted his head, and gazed up into the blue-black tropical night. The stars were like a silver powder over the skies, masses of trailing brightness.

Clearly and unmistakably again came the promise: "Number the stars—if thou canst—so shalt thy seed be."

In the vision of that shining glory his doubts were lost. He was at peace.

2

The jealousies of Sara and Agar brought to one of them at least a wonderful sight of God.

How one wishes that all jealousies could end so finely, and bring such enlightenment. For the end is always the vital point. Our blunders cease to be too depressing, if only we can catch the use of them; to learn from them, and then sharply

forget the blunders, remembering only what we have learnt.

Sara behaved really very well until Agar started lording it over her ; then naturally she got annoyed. Agar fled from her ; not liking quite so much the consequences of the lording as the lording itself. Agar ran away ; and alone in the wilderness found her rebuke. . . Why had she come—where was she going—would it not be better to go back in humility, and with kindness ?

It came to her as a transient sight, showing her what a complete vision God had of *her !* His immanent presence became a reality. She knew that He knew. It had been duly noted—her tiresomeness, her subsequent flight from the consequences. The inward contact—the nearness—left her aglow ; the word "God" took on a new meaning, and in the fulness of that new meaning she gave Him a new name ; a name tingling with her recent experience : "Thou, the God who hath seen me." Rather a lovely one, even if rather long. And so permeated was she with this new realization of God's actual and continual sight of her, that not only did she give this name to God, but also she called the well by which she had rested after Him : "the well of Him that liveth and seeth me."

Solitude and the wilderness ; Agar and her thoughts. Deliberately signalling her answer to God ; waving her prayers, as incense burning heavenward—even if at first, perhaps, a little smokily.

"Thou that livest and seeth me."

3

Do you remember I phoned to you on the morning of our Confirmation? In a whirl of joy, because the day had at last come, I spluttered excitedly through the receiver what I had, a few moments before, read in the "Imitation" (Omer's copy, the French one, which you had given me after his death). "Je parlerai à mon Seigneur, bien que je sois cendre et poussière." Not *chosen* for the day's reading, but just where the daily reading had brought one to. It seemed so gloriously appropriate.

"For I am nothing and I knew it not . . . but if Thou look upon me, I presently become strong, and am replenished with a new joy. . . Thou, O most sweet Lord, dost deal with me above all desert, and above all that I dare hope or ask for. . . O, convert us unto Thee, that we may be humble, thankful and devout; for Thou art our salvation, our courage, and our strength."

I did not, of course, phone all these bits from that chapter, only that little French bit; and I remember there was some difficulty to get the "poussière" over to you.

"The *what?*" you said.

"Cinders, ashes, dust," I called.

"Oh! *dust!*" coming back from you, with such a curious double inflexion: having both grasped the word, and also what it stood for.

I saw us so light in our utter dustiness—as if we might be whirled away—blown straight to Heaven.

The other day I found, to my surprise, that it was Abraham who had said those words. "Seeing

I have begun, I will speak to my Lord, whereas I am dust and ashes." Well, seeing that we had been baptized, seeing that we too had begun . . . dust and ashes . . . but presently to become strong, replenished with new joy . . .

What a long time had seemed that waiting, that living, as it were, on our instruction.

From the last summer to the next spring (there was no hurrying, Monsignor, was there? That is a thing which simply can't be done!) whilst wondering where in the world all this *was* going to land one. Quietly and almost imperceptibly losing sight of familiar landmarks that had seemed so useful in the past—a terrible letting go—and a more terrible glancing backwards—an occasional uneasiness, if not regret—a pushing through a weedy accumulation of rubbish which once seemed so pleasant! Then at last baptism—re-birth! Oh, clean and white as woolly lambs! And now our confirmation; when we should be signed with the sign of the Cross.

The moorings were cut for ever—we were adrift towards Heaven.

Immediately after these tremendous happenings came Lent; something to keep us moderately sober, and take the starch out of the uppishness—Lent and dry bread.

Are you wondering why ever our confirmation comes in here? It's those words, you see, which turned out to be Abraham's.

How little could he have imagined, when he said them, me phoning them to you!

4

One likes to think of Sara's happiness when Isaac was born ; although for Agar and Ismael it meant the wilderness !

But Sara's happiness was of the bubbling-over kind. She said that God had "made a laughter" for her, and that "whosoever shall hear of it will laugh with me." A great deal of pure joy in those words. God had taken away her disappointment and had made a laughter out of it. Isaac was born. Abraham was content. There had been no delusion about the promise given to him that starry night : "so shall thy seed be." He lived to see Isaac married to Rebecca, and then he died, at peace with all things ; and was gathered to his people.

5

Isaac. A romantic life. Scenes which appear to be set in unfading light. Yet it is curious that these romances of his were arranged for him by others, although he remains the prominent figure.

Isaac—offered to God by Abraham.

Isaac—waiting for the unknown Rebecca.

Isaac—giving Jacob Esau's blessing.

6

On that journey, when Abraham was tearing *self* into little bits, in order that he might remain faithful to God's command, Isaac was totally unconscious of Abraham's purpose ; merely accompanying his father, as he had done many another

time ; light-hearted, and just sufficiently interested to ask a question or so, as they went along.

"My father . . . behold fire and wood."

His father was carrying the fire and he was carrying the wood.

"My father . . . where is the victim for the holocaust ?"

Unconscious of any grimness ; "my father"—unconscious of the piercing grief of those two words for Abraham. How could Isaac guess the strange throes of detachment through which his father was passing.

Surely it would seem to Abraham that the one thing he could legitimately cling to was Isaac ! Had not God made a promise, long in fulfilment but attained at last ? Could He give, and then so jealously snatch away ? Might not some inward doubt have tempted Abraham to defy God, and bind Him to the security of that promise ?

Yet quietly Abraham walked along in sublime surrender. Perhaps without long years of training—without small and oft-repeated lessons in renunciation and obedience—especially over those seemingly unimportant events of each day—Abraham would have failed. He would not have been able to obey God as implicitly as he did ; he would not have been ready when the crux came ! To say we will do a thing is distinct from actually doing it. Abraham was not saying he would obey ; he was obeying, literally and without hesitation. There is nothing more difficult than obedience. In obeying, our personal inclinations are at a standstill ; the transaction is no longer of self-volition—we are doing the will of another. God gave Abraham certain orders, and Abraham at once set about carrying

them out. One can almost hear the stir in Heaven ; the jubilation over this fidelity of purpose.

But Abraham ? What would he hear, save the beloved voice of his son saying, "My father" ? The sight of that boyish figure beside him, moving along with the strength of youth, filled his senses. They had started on this journey at night, and once more the stars were overhead ; but no moment for star-gazing this—perhaps Abraham dare not look up this time. . . " If any man can number the stars . . ." oh, such a memory had no message for him now.

Between God and Abraham all barriers are down, all reservations swept away ; placing his hopes and fears and prayers unconditionally before God—within the immensity of that loving-kindness—and with heroic endeavour leaving it at that !

There was Abraham actually doing, in his limited capacity, what God in His infinite capacity was presently to do for us. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.

And as Abraham raised the sword to strike his sacrifice was accepted—the victim provided—the ram in the thicket.

7

Rebecca gave a stranger water to drink from the well, and then she drew water for his camels too. Little she knew how much depended on that act of courtesy. For after the camels had drunk, to her astonishment, the stranger bowed down and blessed God, and showered ear-rings and bracelets upon her. She ran back to her mother's house with the news ; the generous pile of gold in her hands and a

little flutter of excitement in her heart. It had been rather thrilling when the stranger had spoken about his master being a relative of her father's—and rather more thrilling still when he had mentioned his master's son !

The family entertained Abraham's servant—he told them his purpose ; nobody seemed inclined to throw cold water over the proceedings. Perhaps the water from the well had proved so efficacious, it might be tempting providence to add one drop more ! But universal approval of any plan is so rare—one's eyes instinctively hover over the display of ear-rings and bracelets—after all, they were Jews !

Anyhow, the affair ran smoothly. A banquet was prepared ; more presents for Rebecca, and presents for everyone else besides. Rebecca's family had no intention of standing in Rebecca's way ; and most assuredly Rebecca had no intention of standing in her own way. There was no shilly-shallying from Rebecca. When she was asked if she would go back with Abraham's servant and become Isaac's wife, she said, without preamble, "I will go." There is something so decisive about the statement that it leaves one wondering whether they could have stopped her, even if they had wished to, and soon Rebecca and entourage were speeding away towards wedding bells.

It was evening when they arrived. Isaac had gone into the fields to meditate ; but all the same, he managed to keep a look-out for camels. He saw them from afar, and went to meet them. Rebecca also saw the young Israelite.

"Who is that man," she asked the servant, "who cometh towards us along the field ?"

"That man is my master," he answered.

Quickly she alighted off her camel, and threw her cloak around her ; and so they met.

And Rebecca became Isaac's wife . . . "and he loved her so much . . ."

8

When Isaac was an old man with failing sight, his last poor, sorry romance was staged for him ; he gave to Jacob the blessing he would have given to Esau. Already had Esau sold his first birthright, and now his blessing, too, had gone to Jacob. "I have blessed him ; and he shall be blessed."

But had his father only one blessing ? "Bless me also, my father." Was there no blessing reserved for him ? "I beseech thee, bless me also" ; and so, out of pity, a blessing and a promise was wrung from Isaac.

It was, indeed, a case of that decided Rebecca having her own way again. Isaac loved Esau, and Rebecca loved Jacob—and there you are. For all that, Isaac had many a happiness. He lived to see the "seeds" sprouting—in other words, became a grandfather. Till, being old, and full of days, and spent with age, he too died, and was gathered to his people.

9

Through the years which separated Esau and Jacob, perhaps one of them never knew complete peace of conscience. A blessing is a blessing—but, if it be stolen ?

No doubt Jacob's conscience awakened more and more as he found around him God's goodness. It

is an awakener of conscience at times. No doubt he softened ; especially would he soften when, at Isaac's bidding, he went to Mesopotamia in search of a wife ; for on that journey came his wonderful dream.

Resting after sunset, stones for a pillow, the night air as a sleeping-draught . . . and a deep dream that united earth and Heaven . . . a vision of the ladder of God's love, by which His angels pass to and fro—with the Almighty One leaning, as it were, on His own love, and through that divine pressure speaking to Jacob : "I am the Lord thy God . . . the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac . . . thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth . . . and I will be thy keeper whithersoever thou goest . . ."

This pathway of love betwixt God and man ! Perhaps even to-day a vision of God's love and of His ministering angels is sometimes within the sight of many a desperately tired life.

One could not exactly remain hard after such a vision. And Jacob ? Awakening all a-tremble with his capture of love ? How terrible—how beautiful—God with us—and he knew it not ; this ladder of love, a pathway to the skies—how beautiful, how terrible ! Perhaps Jacob's real awakening was when he fell asleep. Must he not afterwards have wondered whether this vision should not have been Esau's ; the accompaniment and assurance which would have followed on the blessing he should have received from Isaac ?

Can it be that conscience makes heroes of us all ; or at least holds such a possibility ? Give the grace of God a fair chance, and even though the first glimmer of conscience be only an uneasy fear, only an instinct of self-preservation, prompting a shivering

foothold on the lowest rung of that ladder of love ; and maybe, presently a lovely life will be scrambling with agility towards unknown heights.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom ; and wisdom is the crowning gift of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps we must begin by being little cowards if we would ever be big saints ; must know a cold fear before we can know a divine rapture. Of course, anything may happen in the spiritual life ; and no doubt there are complete reversals, when a soul, entrapped in the divine fire, flutters slowly back to earth, to learn all the intermediary processes ; to sink at last to the very beginning where self and fear dwell. Yet such a soul might find on reaching the lowest that there was *nothing there ;* that fear had been burnt up in the flame of love, and self little more than dust and nothingness.

". . . bien que je sois cendre et poussière . . .

". . . Je vais parler encore, Seigneur, et je ne me tairai point, je dirai à l'oreille de mon Dieu . . . Oh ! Seigneur, quelle abondance de douceurs vous avez réservée à ceux qui vous craignent ! *Mais qu'êtes-vous donc pour ceux qui vous aiment ?*"

No, I am *not* going back to our confirmation again—and I truly *will* try to stick to Jacob's conscience, and its results.

Long years after—years while Jacob served for Rachel, and served again ; when by day he had been parched with heat, and by night gripped by frost—years after these things, and many others had happened, long years after, he went in search of Esau.

Now Jacob was afraid of Esau, but he was no longer afraid of God. That humbling vision of love

had gradually brought him to simplicity. He speaks without shame, as if he were a little child, or a member of the Salvation Army. "My soul has been saved," he says. There is no fear between his soul and God. His contrition and his resolutions had settled that account. But there is a good deal of fear between his body and Esau. How could he tell what sort of reception Esau would give him? There remained that past stealing. Was he forgiven, he wondered. He sent messengers ahead to tell Esau how anxious he was to find favour in his brother's sight. And it was not particularly reassuring when those messengers returned with the news that Esau was speeding to meet him with four hundred men. It might of course be for his honour, but, oh, more likely it might be for his death. He was in a panic, and his prayer was a frenzy. God must deliver him from Esau.

"O God of my father Abraham, and God of my father Isaac . . . I am not worthy of the least of all Thy mercies . . . deliver me from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am greatly afraid of him."

And Jacob dispatched gifts to Esau ; it was very much as if he had dispatched his conscience to his brother, hoping to make amends. And there swarmed towards Esau goats and sheep and camels—peace offerings—reparation.

At last they met ; Esau all affection and solicitude; Jacob all desire to find favour, to be forgiven.

10

The story of Joseph, and of his eventual reunion with Jacob, I am leaving. But as you can read, it does not matter. It is, as you know, a very beautiful

story. Jacob was the father of Joseph and Benjamin, and Rachel was their mother. Rachel died by the wayside when Benjamin was born. It was springtime, and she and Jacob were journeying towards Ephrata. Poor Rachel, buried by the highway. Poor little Benjamin, with no other mother than the soft spring air !

The last we hear of Jacob, he is calling his sons together to bless them before he dies ; reminding Joseph of God's promise : that He would bring him back to the land of his fathers. Joseph, too, in his turn, before he died, reminded his brothers of this same promise : "God will visit you after my death," he told them, " and will make you go up out of this land, to the land which He swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

CHAPTER III

I

Israel in Egypt—for us via the Crystal Palace! What a lovely day that was when you took me to the Handel Festival. I had never heard "Israel in Egypt." There was also the additional joy of hearing what I was reading at the moment. Appropriate, as you said, for the "seeds." And I thank you very much for the pleasure you gave me—not merely a momentary one either—for more than once have I re-lived that evening (with its sights and sounds and smells and tastes) which at the time slipped away so quickly. A place of pleasant memories for both of us, the Crystal Palace: memories dating back to other days, which seem as dreams. First of all the Palace itself, with its own peculiar smell, coming from one knows not what, probably a mixture of a little bit of everything; and still there, many a familiar sight and sound; the miniature model of the Coliseum at Rome . . . the stalls with patent arrangements for sale . . . but the Zulu chief was there no more . . . and when I spoke to you about him, you said, perhaps the moth had got into his hair, and that he had to be removed . . . of all the horrid ideas . . . !

Taking what was still there, and what was there no more—like the poor Zulu chief—and many another affair, beyond invasion from moth: things

so ethereal, so evanescent that almost one could have doubted they had ever been, were it not for a strange inward contraction, the answer of the body to the sigh of the mind, which told one that surely enough such things once were. A misty remembrance of someone looking ahead—someone called by one's own name—picturing what life might be. And now, there is no doubt as to what it actually has been. Yet, all that has really happened (so different from what one imagined) with its swift movement and lights—with its very bright and high lights . . . and its shades, its dimness . . . its darkness . . . all of infinite worth. The tests and trials, the sorrows and joys of life . . . experience . . . the siftings of the soul. How much, I expect, both of us recalled that day !

You follow what I mean about sights and sounds and smells ? Well, the *taste* of this outing of ours is mixed grill and coffee. Your splendid idea of having our dinner there, before we settled down to listen to the performance, which was, for me, a settling down to almost ecstatic enjoyment. But I must say I did not lose the pleasure of one mouthful of the mixed grill ! The very quantity on the plate was a satisfaction. When mine was on the plate no more, I felt rather as I imagine a snake must feel when it has swallowed another snake bigger than itself ! It was worth it, though. And through the open windows came the birds, flying and hopping around, on the look-out for their mixed grill. I thought : well, we are here together again, after all those years—all those ebbs and flows.

Then to our places. Gradually the rising tiers were filled. The conductor arrived. He made a circling movement of his arm ; the choir rose. A moment's pause—then the voice of one man, clear

and bell-like, floating towards us—with only six, low, sustained chords from the orchestra . . . that single sound, floating, rising—it had begun.

2

"Now there arose a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph ; and he set over Israel task-masters to afflict them with burdens ; and they made them serve with rigour."

That was the recitative which carried us away to Egypt. Immediately we heard the sigh of the Children of Israel : gasps of sound, pressed from them by their weariness, sighing because of their bondage.

"And their cry went up unto God."

They were made to serve with rigour.

"And their cry went up unto God."

They sighed, poor Children of Israel ; and from their oppressed and tired lives always their cry mounted up unto God.

Their sighs and cries rolled over us ; now high, now low. Quite impossible to describe that one last shrill, piercing, ascending cry.

One felt ready to embrace the little Moses. One knew that he was coming, as one knows the answer will come to all prayer. *This* answer was found lying in a basket made of bulrushes ; Pharao's daughter saw it among the sedges, by the river bank. She opened the basket, and as she bent over it the child cried. That was all right ; Moses was safe. The king who knew not Joseph was not going to throw this wee squaller into the river—not if she knew it ! He might be a king, and he might be a Pharao, but, after all, he was only her father. The process of outwitting him did not fill her with fear.

She would adopt the baby ; it could easily be arranged for the mother to look after him—capital idea. One imagines the significant glance which passed between Pharao's daughter and her maid. The maid should fetch a Hebrew woman to nurse this forsaken infant ? Their eyes met and exchanged unspoken words ; the mother was called.

Adopted by the king's daughter, and cared for by his own mother, Moses grew in safety to manhood.

Then God seized hold of his life ; and he became in the hand of God—as the pen I write with is in my hand—a means of communication.

Moses was a prophet to whom God revealed Himself very clearly, leaping to him in flames of fire, covering him with His glory as with a cloud. For God spoke to Moses " as a man is wont to speak to a friend."

3

Moses was tending Jethro's sheep when God, as it were, first touched his life.

Nearby to where Moses had driven the flock he noticed that there was a bush on fire. Yet as he looked he saw that the bush was not actually on fire, but that from the midst of it sprang a flame. It was astonishing—the bush seemed alight, yet it was not consumed. He was immensely interested. He must see this great sight, and discover the reason of it. Explanations were generally simple enough—it was merely a matter of arriving at them. He walked a step or two nearer—but suddenly stopped short. Somewhere, infinitely far away yet extraordinarily near—somewhere away in the blue, yet seemingly within his ears, he caught the sound of holy,

holy, holy; while echoing over the heaven he heard his name—"Moses, Moses." It was the shock of contact, the Almighty's touch upon a soul ; and nothing could ever be quite the same for him again. It was an absorbing and personal grasp, full of wonder and mystery ; but definite and unmistakable.

Moses hid his face while God thundered over him. "I am the God of thy father Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."

Gradually, as spiritual insight came to Moses, he knew that this mighty God had come to deliver the people of Israel ; had heard their cry, had seen their affliction. Moses was to go to his people with the news that their deliverance was at hand ; he was to go to Pharao and tell him he had come to lead forth the Children of Israel out of Egypt.

Now, that was a much more alarming thing to be told to do than if I were to command you to walk into Buckingham Palace, and ask the King and Queen for the loan of a servant for a few days. You would dismiss me and my suggestion with a "don't be silly." But Moses was in a dilemma ; to interview Pharao would be bad enough, yet to disregard God would be worse.

It was all very well to stand there in front of a bush that was alight yet would not burn, while there rolled around him the divine promises ; but what would it be like to stand before Pharao in cold reality? He knew very well what would happen. *Would* the Children of Israel be likely to listen to him? Who in the world would believe that the Lord had appeared to him? Who was he, that he should do and say these things? Nevertheless, the divine communications did not cease : God would be with him, He would stretch forth

His hand and strike Egypt with all His wonders! After this, Pharao would let the Children go. Of course, it sounded very glorious, but . . . there was still great hesitation.

Then strange things began to happen to Moses.

What was it that he held in his hand? A rod, so he thought and said. But no, indeed, it was a serpent; and Moses cast it from him in fear. He was told to pick it up. Moses did not want to pick up a serpent. Who would? But amidst such queer happenings private judgment seemed out of place. Better to be bitten by a serpent than disobey; and in spite of fear, he just managed it . . . and in his hand was his old stick.

"That they may believe the Lord God hath appeared to thee." Nor was that all. "Put thy hand in thy bosom." Moses did; and when he drew it out it was as the hand of a leper.

"Put back thy hand in thy bosom." Once more it was tucked in; and when he brought it out again it was his ordinary and familiar hand. "That they may believe." And if they would not believe these things, Moses was to strike with the rod the waters of the river; and the water would be turned to blood.

The rod was to be his assurance—a mystic sign through which God would work His wonders. And though he felt uncertain as to what his old stick would be up to next, yet serpent or rod, or whatever it might happen to be at the moment, he would not now have parted with it for anything.

. . . . .

To draw so nigh to God !
Humbly to stand with naked feet on holy ground !
Please, Eternal God, give us, too, our sight . . .
"A touch divine—
And the scaled eye-ball owns the mystic rod ;
Visibly through His garden walketh God."

4

Handel resumes the story, with Aaron and Moses :

"Then sent He Moses his servant, and Aaron whom He had chosen ; these showed His signs among them and wonders in the land of Ham. He turned their water into blood."

That was the recitative, followed by a veritable vomiting of loathing. "They *loathed* to drink of the river," as if the chorus were spitting it from their mouths ; such a heavy emphasis on the word *loathed*.

Pharao and his people went through a great deal ; giving a promise of freedom, only to snatch it away when the danger was past. "Their land brought forth frogs, yea, even in the king's chambers. He gave their cattle over to the pestilence ; blotches and blains broke forth on man and beast. He spake the word, and there came all manner of flies and lice in all their quarters. He spake ; and the locusts came without number, and devoured the fruits of the ground. He gave them hailstones for rain ; fire mingled with hail ran upon the ground. He sent a thick darkness over all the land, even darkness which might be felt."

Finally, because Pharao would not yield, God sent

the last terrible plague: "He smote all the first-born of Egypt, the chief of all their strength."

. . . .

"But as for *His* people."

Although the "His" comes at the end of the bar, it received the accent.

Oh! the lovely music! Green fields were in it, and undulating pasture land, gentle cooling streams, shade and sweet refreshment, clear skies and far horizons.

He led them forth like sheep. He brought them out with silver and gold.

If Pharao suffered, so also did Moses. He suffered from continual ingratitude. Poor Moses, he certainly went through something too; but his was a different kind of suffering from Pharao's; for Moses had done nothing wrong; and how that alters the quality of suffering. But, poor Moses! he was often whipped by ingratitude. Soon after they were off it started. When the Children of Israel saw Pharao's army pursuing them, they fairly turned on Moses; and not for the last time either.

"Perhaps there were no graves in Egypt," therefore they had been brought to die in the wilderness. Stinging words; but they were in dire distress. Cut off on one side by the sea, on the other by Pharao's horses and chariots and all his army. The murmuring of the children was around Moses—incessant, tormenting. Why had he brought them to this; why had he done this to them; why not have left them where they were? Better to serve in Egypt than to die in this trap of a desert! They

had told him to go away before, and leave them with the Egyptians ; but of course he was so sure he knew best ; and now look what had come of it.

But Moses remembered his little rod, and God.

He told them not to fear ; they should see the wonders of the Lord, "for the Egyptians whom you see now, you shall not see again."

With nothing but an expanse of sea before them, God commanded Moses to tell the Children of Israel to go *forward*. Moses had but to lift up his rod, and stretch out his hand over the sea, and it would divide ; and Israel should pass through on dry land. And Moses took his rod, and lifted it over the sea, and God's whisper went across the sea, and it was dried up. The water rose as a wall, on the right hand and on the left.

As the choir sang I slipped back to days when I had floated over the Red Sea on the deck of a liner. I recalled it again, as I had actually seen it, how many a time ! The sandy stretches of the Suez Canal as one approached—the pink-winged flamingoes in the early light at dawn, the receding shores, the sun-dried rocks, the widening sea as the ship sails on—until there is nothing left around one but Red Sea. A mighty sea ; perhaps giving off a shimmering glittering heat, perhaps swelling into stormy waves ; but a mighty sea.

And God had led those people through this deep as through a wilderness !

Pharao and all his army followed the Children of Israel along the path of dry land, between the divided waters ; but they were carried into the deep, the sea closed down on them. For Moses had again raised his rod. The depths covered the Egyptians, and they sank to the bottom as a stone. The wind

blew, and covered them, and they sank as lead in the mighty waters.

Then the Children of Israel, who had passed dry-shod through the sea, broke into a canticle of praise: "I will sing unto the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously; the horses and the riders He hath thrown into the sea."

Yet for *His* people, the waters were gathered together—the flowing waters *stood*—they became unmovable until Thy people, O Lord, passed by—until this Thy people passed by!

They danced for joy, with timbrels in their hands, these poor children.

They were out of Egypt!

. . . .

The last chord had sounded. It was finished—that pleasant enterprise was over.

Outside the Crystal Palace we found Arthur, waiting for us with the car. Nice to go back like that; nice to go purring through the darkness. How warm and clean the night air seemed. Home at last—"Goodnight and thank you." Just words, but, oh, how much behind them!

As I opened the door I stood for a moment, watching the lights of your car disappearing around the bend of the garden—all over, truly.

CHAPTER IV

The Children of Israel having crossed the Red Sea, were led by Moses into the desert. Moving before them, a cloud, a light ; a sign from God to show them the way. This guiding pillar never left them ; always by day a cloud, by night a luminous beacon. One might almost call the pillar of cloud the children's nursery, and the pillar of flame, their night-light !

Unfortunately there was something else which was scarcely ever absent : the murmuring of the Israelites. It was certainly to be relied on whenever anything went wrong. They never learnt to trust at the right moment ; namely, the moment when there appears to be nothing left to trust in. They never acquired the habit. Whenever anything went wrong, they took fright, and stampeded around Moses. That they invariably received help counted for nothing. Perhaps this characteristic failing helps one to understand how it was that later on the Jews missed Christ. One feels sure that Moses, like St. Paul, would not have missed Our Lord ; there are startling examples throughout the Old Testament of what a Hebrew is capable of. With them it seems to be either the appalling pride of self-sufficiency, or an infinite capacity for the Kingdom of Heaven.

What a heart-breaking affair it must have been

for Moses, leading those Children to the Promised Land, and how weary he must have become of their murmurings.

In reading the life of any saint who is trying to rouse a sleeping world ; to right a wrong ; to bring back a people to purity—to God—one finds the life of that saint is broken on the wheel of opposition. One watches such a soul in wonder ; a solitary figure hurling itself again and again against overwhelming odds. Tired out and broken quite in the process, yet never ceasing, never resting ; fighting with God for those who will not fight for themselves.

The life of Moses was a living act of unwavering faith. The children would murmur, and Moses would cry to God for them. (Why ever could they not have gone down on their own knees and prayed, instead of thronging round Moses and reproaching him ?) They had not gone far before they were hankering after the flesh-pots of Egypt. No doubt food was difficult—a multitude moving in a wilderness, with no food supplies sent along from a well-organised base ; and thirsty work, too, trekking across sandy wastes, where water was often scarce.

Once, when at last water was found, it proved to be undrinkable—bitter and useless. There was murmuring ; Moses prayed, and the bitterness was turned to sweetness. At another time, not even bitter water—nothing but a rock—a rock, and Moses and a rod, and God !

It was, indeed, always with Moses a case of trusting in God's help ; of talking over troubles with Him, as we are apt to talk them over one with another. "What shall I do to this people ?" he would ask God ; and on receiving a promise from Him, without waiting to see if it would come true, he

would straightway tell the Children what would presently happen.

They were hungry? Very well, he promised them, in the evening they should eat flesh, and in the morning God would rain bread from Heaven.

Do we understand what this means?

In the middle of a wilderness, with thousands of hungry people clamouring for food, and with no more idea than you of how bread could be rained from Heaven; yet without hesitation he gives them the promise of God. It is the kind of courageous faith which makes small trouble over moving mountains, or removing them altogether, if need be!

"You shall see the glory of God." That was his constant cry. And they did see it; for in the evening quails *did* arrive, and in the morning the ground *was* covered with a dewy frost, sweet and good to eat, tasting like flour and honey.

Moses tried to teach the Children his own simple faith—he reasoned with them—he instructed them. If they would but do right before God, obey His commandments, keep His precepts, no evil would befall them; God alone was their healer.

One wonders if Moses ever ceased to pray; he literally prayed them through their dfficulties. Once his clasped hands won a battle; perhaps there is no other story so replete with simplicity, and the efficacy of prayer. It is the account of the battle which Amalec fought against the Israelites. Moses prayed while they fought; and the fortunes of the Israelites lay, as it were, in his uplifted hands. While his hands were raised the battle went in their favour; but when he grew weary, and lowered his hands for a while, the Israelites were overcome. At last those

tired hands, unable any longer to pull down God's help, were propped up heavenward until the battle was won.

. . . .

Shall we for the moment leave the Children to their wanderings, and their fightings, and their murmurings (they did it for forty years, so we have plenty of time !). Shall we take a view of our own prayers, and of how prayer came to us—make a little cycle of prayer ? Perhaps the prayers of Moses will take us soaring up for a while !

We can easily swoop down again upon the "seeds," and pick them up, wherever they may have sown themselves during our absence !

CHAPTER V

[A SONG CYCLE OF PRAYER]

ANYONE'S SONG

BEFORE you and I were Catholics, when we were, in fact, nothing at all, we put in quite a number of unconscious prayers.

Like others in the world who do not give a thought to religion of any kind, we did give a great deal of time to these unconscious prayers. Such prayers belong to all those who have either lost sight of God, or have never known Him ; and in these prayers there can be no vision of Heaven ; and, of course, they are always to gain some material end. But look at the *desire* over worldly things ; the striving, the craving ; look at the effort which is made over the affairs of this life ; think of the concentration it takes, for instance, to make a successful business man.

A longing is a prayer, even if an unconscious one ; and when one considers the output, it is no wonder that these unconscious prayers are so often answered. If only over our conscious prayers to God we were to take half the care, make half the effort, what might not happen !

Prayers to God are the song ; the accompaniment should be our own personal strenuous endeavour.

The unconscious prayers are all accompaniment—they miss the song—and that is sad.

But how often the conscious prayers *miss* the accompaniment—and that is foolish.

When Lindsey came home from his holiday he told me a story which is not too bad an illustration. Out for a walk, he came to a bay which looked suitable for bathing. The beach was of large flattened stones, and shelved quickly. Rather heavy waves were breaking on the shore, but once through them, just an undulation that bobbed one up and down. However, when the moment arrived for coming out, he found it none too easy. He swam in on a wave, and was landed on the steep slope of rounded stones. As he tried to scramble up the stones slipped back with him, and he was in the water once more. He made several unsuccessful attempts—reaching the beach, trying to scramble up, slipping back each time. He thought: "I can't stay here for the rest of my life," and pulled himself together to make a final effort; by clinging on with his hands and feet, and elbows and knees, he managed to crawl out.

You see, there was always the help of the waves, if only he could manage to make use of it, and then keep his hold. But the waves alone would not do everything for him, there was something he had to do for himself. So it is between ourselves and God.

The grace of God is always helping us, always carrying us up higher. But as surely as God sends us grace, so as surely does He look for our answer, our own personal endeavour. It is this tremendous personal striving in the lives of the saints which arrests one's attention.

God's grace washes us upwards towards Him—

then comes our answer back ; and upon that answer the safety of our landing in Heaven depends. Our weaknesses are as innumerable and as slippery as those rounded stones ; but we have to get over them somehow.

When Lindsey told me about this little adventure I thought it was uncommonly like one's own journey heavenward ; one is hardly ever fairly and squarely on one's feet. Sometimes all energy of mind and of body seem used up, in order to keep travelling, even if only on all-fours . . . and at the best, it is only a scramble . . . perhaps never more than rather a desperate clutching . . . ah me ! if only such poor things may be accounted as an answer to God's call . . . one can but hope that even their poverty may be better than no answer at all.

God, in His loving-kindness, will see the desire of the soul beneath the ugliness of the strain ; and because of that wonderful goodness of His, one realises that a graceful and elegant performance might not necessarily be more pleasing to Him.

You will catch the reminder of this ramble ; how we started with nothing, or with as near to nothing as it is possible for any lonely wanderers to be (and one of them with a horrible tendency towards easy-chairs, and comfort, and the soft side of life generally—and that one not you, my dear), and how we have moved along from the nothing stage to the scrambling stage.

The other songs are some of our stepping-stones.

OMER'S SONG

Dear Omer, poor Omer. What unyielding material he had to work on. Yet, as surely as Moses

prayed the Children of Israel into the Promised Land, so surely did Omer pray us into the Catholic Church.

"Ce charmant ami, toujours si courageux, si gai."

On one of his leaves he took you to High Mass at the cathedral. Only now, on looking back, can we guess at the way in which he would have been speaking to Our Lord. Afterwards you wrote to him, saying you had very nearly asked him to kneel with you, and pray for you, in one of those small side chapels, and that perhaps if you had you would not be quite so devoid of faith and light as you were. Omer wrote back : "If only you had, it would have been the happiest day of my life." But his faith would tell him that God had marked that little fluttering within your soul.

On another of those flying visits to England he told you that he hoped during his next leave to make a pilgrimage to Lourdes. "*Pilgrimage !*" you said ; "why, my dear boy, it's not done these days. You must be thinking you are living in the Middle Ages." He never made that pilgrimage ; before the opportunity came some more urgent duty called him to Heaven. For, though we did not know it then, Omer had offered his life to God—that gay, young, strong life—for your conversion.

On his last leave he asked you in his funny English, if he were killed, would you promise to go down on your knees and make "a bid" for his soul. You gave him the promise, and he was killed, and you kept the promise. So his death took you down on to your knees ; and through it, through the sacrifice of his life, it is as if he had kept you on them ever since.

Just before he was killed he seemed to know the moment had come. He left instructions. As he

was going into the trenches, for what proved to be the last time, he called Collas aside, and told him what he should write to you (what Collas afterwards actually did), writing first that he had been severely wounded, and then afterwards the entire truth. "Dites d'abord à ma chére Marraine que je suis que blessé, pour ne suffoquer trop fort. . . ."

All this was during your long illness. The second letter—"the entire truth"—I brought up to your room. You opened it, and I saw your face turn grey. . . .

When I was able to remember anything other than your loss, I remembered Omer as I had last seen him—standing on the front-door steps at S——. I was going home, and he was returning to Belgium that night. For the moment I was alone with him. He took my hand to say good-bye. Looking at me very intently, he said, "You think I will come back?" I told him I was sure of it. But it was not true. I saw in his eyes the unspoken message——also a new strange light—and I knew we should never see him again.

After Omer's death there seemed nothing left to do—no more parcels—no more letters with their amusing serial pictures of little M. at the war—just nothing, emptiness.

Yet after all there was a great deal to be done, not so much for him, as for ourselves. One by one we have dropped on our knees beside you ; finding in our hearts his beautiful sacrifice growing and flowering.

Look ! You
Me Tiger
Arthur
Connie

In his last letter but one, written three days before he was killed, he said : "If everyone had an ideal, this life would be perfect . . . I think religion often suggests ideals which look absurd to non-believers. For religious people, *real* believers, something is above all, God. Any sacrifice is light, and must be done with pleasure, if done for God."

In the course of time his few belongings were sent to you ; and you gave me his copy of the "Imitation." His bookmark was still in at the place where he had left it—probably where he had last read. The chapter closed with these words. "Car, lorsque la grâce de Dieu visite l'homme, alors il devient capable de tout. . . . En cet état, vous ne devez pas vous laisser abattre ni perdre l'espérance, mais vous en tenir paisiblement à la volonté divine, et souffrir pour la gloire de Jésus-Christ tout ce qui vous arrive ; car à l'hiver succède l'été, après la nuit vient le jour, et après la tempête une grande sérénité."

Beloved Omer, have you not been given more than you asked for ? And, oh, how much more than we can at present guess !

Have we not, all of us, been almost a little overwhelmed by subsequent events ?

One looks back, one remembers Omer's sacrifice, in loving gratitude.

From that lonely, tired death, has there not sprung up over England a light—a vision ?

"Car à l'hiver succède l'été, après la nuit vient le jour, et après la tempête une grande sérénité."

OUR LAME SONG

You asked me one afternoon to go with you to Farm Street. It was during those years, before Omer's death, when his influence was drifting you in and out of Catholic churches. As we went (and it was a very unwilling going on my part, for it was a hot day—and why go into a church at all?) you told me I must kneel down when the others did. I said I did not want to. But you persuaded. "Can't you kneel down and say a little prayer?" I said I had nothing to pray for; besides, I did not know how to pray. You know what you are, when once you have got an idea in your head; you insisted that I could at least kneel down and *wish* for something. "You can have a wish, can't you? There must be something you could wish for."

We arrived, and I did go on my knees for a few seconds, to please you—and I did wish for something. To my amazement and discomfort, it came true almost at once . . . and it has never quite ceased—never wholly left me.

It was Benediction, but we knew it not! The priest was wearing white and gold. The candles were alight . . . one saw the white and blue of the altar rail—marble and lapis—and one saw at the right end of the rail the lovely statue of Our Lady. Around her was hanging a long lace veil. Misty, she looked, and beautiful . . . so still . . . one's own life such a turmoil!

MONSIGNOR'S SONG

We shall never hear it entirely, or understand its import, until we get to Heaven. Yet the beginning of it—how well we recall those notes.

It was Monsignor who instructed us—Monsignor who received us into the Church. We had a very long instruction ; perhaps because of our speechlessness. Did we ever ask a question ? We took chairs in that room with a set purpose ; and we were quite willing to go on taking chairs there until we were considered ready to pass into the Church. But I think our silence must have been rather baffling, and probably would have been irritating to many another. I expect he was waiting to find out what we *did* think—if anything—whilst we were merely waiting to be admitted.

Those were happy days of peace and wonder. After we were baptized, and before we were confirmed, Monsignor went to Rome. He wrote and told us he had prayed for us at the tomb of St. Peter and St. Paul. You wrote back and said how grateful we were, and that although we had not any tombs where we could pray for him, we had sittings in two churches, and that we hoped . . . etc., etc. You wondered if he would think it flippant. But true holiness does not misunderstand—looking towards Heaven, there is always a smile.

Nevertheless Monsignor and St. Peter and St. Paul were responsible for a great deal ! As one of us said to the other of us not so long ago, during one of those walking talks of ours (we stood still for a second ; you know—when there is something very special to say—how we stop dead to say it), that we had little known, when we became Catholics, what we were letting ourselves in for ! !

While Monsignor was in Rome, we were beginning to be swept off our feet. We were totally without an idea of the efficacy of prayer. We could scarcely

have believed that Amalec could have been defeated by the lifting of one man's hands.

But I remember writing to Monsignor that I wondered if it could be *healthy*, to be so occupied with heavenly things ; and that I was taking a course in logic, as a distraction ! One sees now, it was like putting up a straw to stop a flood !

After Monsignor returned from Rome, we were confirmed—enfolded in the mystic embrace of the Church—enveloped in the Eternal.

You see how the prayers come creeping—creeping unseen beneath the surface of our entanglements . . . and our own little chirpings . . . how lovely it all is—lovely in God's goodness.

CHAPTER VI

I

Coming down from our prayers, where more suitable to alight than before the Ark of the Covenant, wherein was kept the testimony of God?

You remember our idea about the Old Testament being a preparation: a means of teaching us faith, a preliminary initiation, a prelude to the coming of Christ? Surely here, in the Ark, one finds a distinctive message. Are we not being led towards our Tabernacle, wherein is kept the Blessed Sacrament: God's new testimony of love?

We know that God is omnipresent; we know His sovereignty is over all, and without Him nothing could have existence; yet God did not dwell in the Ark by His omnipresence. In the Ark of the Covenant God was present in some special and peculiar manner. The Ark meant victory and salvation to the Israelites when they obeyed God's commandments; it also meant death and destruction when they were disobedient, or fell away into idolatry.

The Ark of the Testimony—the Tabernacle of the Covenant . . . gold and silver and brass, violet and purple and scarlet, fine linen and goats' hair, and ram skins dyed red, and violet skins; precious stones and golden candlesticks; oil to make lights, spices and ointment and sweet-smelling incense.

One realises one is looking at something very lovely—gorgeously so. "A lamp may burn always . . . and I will make me a sanctuary, and I will dwell in the midst of them." There does not seem anything unfamiliar in this, neither is it difficult for us to believe in that distinctive immanence of God.

Sanctified, and filled with His glory—mysterious and wonderful—wrapt in cloudy darkness—covered in unearthly light. A power in the wilderness, preparing the way for Christ.

The Ark of the Covenant.

2

While Moses was on the top of Mount Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments from God, the Children of Israel grew tired of waiting for him; they turned against him, and became very stiff-necked indeed. And Aaron—on this occasion, the less said about him, the better.

They brought him their trinkets. They wanted a God *made* (a parallel would be a Catholic leaving the Church for table-rapping). For, they said, "as to this man Moses, the man that brought us out of the land of Egypt, we know not what has befallen him," and from the general tone of these words, it is fairly clear they did not want to know—"this man Moses"—not much affection there.

One is sorry to write it, but the molten calf did not make itself; Aaron made it for them. "And the people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play."

While upon the top of the mount, alone with God, in mystical communion with Him, was Moses. He had passed into that state of prayer which is

indescribable ; for Moses was away in that "dark cloud wherein God was." Yet beneath the obscurity of the unknowable was the clarity of supernatural vision ; and shining through the incomprehensible, clear as the clearest sky, bright as the sapphire blue of an unclouded heaven, was the finger of God, tracing in the commandments His divine will.

3

Josue was awaiting Moses, and they returned to the encampment together. As they drew near Josue heard the noise of the people shouting. "The noise of battle," he said, "is heard in the camp."

But Moses answered : "It is not the cry of men encouraging to fight, nor the shout of men compelling to flee. But I hear the voice of singers."

Probably Moses guessed ; anyway, he soon knew ; soon saw the dancers, saw the golden calf. A frenzy of rage seized him. In the fury of his hurry to reach the abomination, to destroy it and trample it to powder, he flung from him the Tables of Stone on which were written God's Commandments ; and they were broken. Those Commandments, which had been made at the top of the Mount by God, were broken at the foot of the Mount by sin.

God making laws on high whilst people break them on earth. Well, we do not find that particularly hard to believe either !

Moses standing at the entrance to the camp, cried in a loud voice to the Children : "If any man be on the Lord's side, let him join with me."

Then Moses told the Children he would return to God and beseech His pardon for this very sin.

Like St. Paul, Moses would have even renounced

the favour of God, if by so doing he could have saved those sinning souls from His wrath. He implored God to be merciful and forgive them . . . offering to buy that mercy at any price . . . if by any means he might entreat for them . . . "forgive them, or strike me out of the book that Thou hast written."

Moses must have already—time and time again—offered to God everything in his life which was a legitimate offering, for the sake of those erring children ; till at last, in his desperation, he would have flung away his own salvation . . . "strike me out of the book . . . if by any means . . ."

But Our Heavenly Father took care of Moses when he had no mind to take care of himself. "He that hath sinned against me, him will I strike out of my book."

It seems from these two instances, of Moses and St. Paul, that if one were once to begin depleting oneself in God's service, it might happen that one would scarcely know where to stop . . . could there be a limit . . . if by *any* means . . . ?

It is then this heavenly care would be around us ; we should find that almost unbelievable personal solicitude which God gives to every single one of us ; the God who numbers the hairs of our head, and paints the lily, and is mindful of the little sparrows.

We may, it seems, for the sake of others, give away everything but God's love. Everything else will be acceptable ; a fragrant payment of sweet incense. But His love is our everlasting life—and that we may not give.

But looking at the situation quietly, perhaps we need not be afraid of being too generous.

4

There came a time when the Israelites refused to go any further with Moses. They did not want to hear what God had to say to him. It is called the Schism of Core.

So Moses told Core and all his followers to stand apart ; also he warned the others to leave the tents of Core, and to touch nothing which belonged to him, lest they should be involved in his sins. "Then Moses said : By this you shall know that the Lord hath sent me to do all things that you see, and that I have not forged them of my own hand. If these men die the common death of men, and if they be visited with a common plague, wherein others are wont to be visited ; the Lord did not send me. But if the Lord do a new thing, and the earth opening her mouth swallow them down, and all things that belong to them, and they go alive into hell ; you shall know that they have blasphemed the Lord. And immediately the earth broke asunder under their feet. And opening her mouth, devoured them with their tents and all their substance. And they went down alive into hell, the ground closing upon them ; and they perished from among the people."

This is not the only time the Israelites were sifted by God . . . as we ourselves are sometimes sifted, even in these days.

In the Bible there is a chapter dealing with God's promises and warnings to the Children of Israel. To read it now seems like a kind of inverted crystal-gazing ; a gazing backwards into those far-off days. One looks around at the Jews, scattered as they are at the present time ; all recorded long ago.

The chapter commences with God's promises ;

these promises will only be fulfilled if the Israelites keep His commandments. And then it continues with this prophetic warning. "But if you will not hear me, nor do all my commandments . . . I will quickly visit you with poverty, and burning heat, which shall waste your eyes, and consume your lives . . . . I will set my face against you, and you shall fall down before your enemies ; and shall be made subject to them that hate you. You shall flee when no man pursueth you . . . and I will break the pride of your stubbornness ; and I will make to you the heaven above as iron, and the earth as brass. . . . And if even so you will not amend, but will walk contrary to me ; I also will walk contrary to you. . . . And I will bring in upon you the sword that shall avenge my covenant . . . and you shall be delivered into the hands of your enemies. But if you will not for all this hearken to me, but will walk against me, I will also go against you with opposite fury. . . I will destroy your high places, and break your idols, and my soul shall abhor you : Insomuch that I will bring your cities to be a wilderness : and I will make your sanctuaries desolate —and I will destroy your land ; and your enemies shall be astonished at it, when they shall be the inhabitants thereof. And I will scatter you among the Gentiles ; and I will draw out the sword after you. And your land shall be desert, and your cities destroyed . . . And as to them that remain of you, I will send fear into their hearts in the countries of their enemies. The sound of a flying leaf shall terrify them . . . they shall flee when no man pursueth them . . . you shall perish among the Gentiles ; and an enemy's land shall consume you. And if of them also some remain, they shall pine away in their

iniquities, in the land of their enemies ; and they shall be afflicted for the sins of their fathers, and their own.

"Until they confess their iniquities, and the iniquities of their ancestors, whereby they have transgressed against me. . . . Then shall they pray for their sins. And I will remember my covenant, that I made with Jacob, and Isaac, and Abraham . . . but they shall pray for their sins . . . and yet for all that when they were in the land of their enemies, I did not cast them off altogether. Neither did I so despise them that they should be quite consumed.

"And I will remember my former covenant, when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, in the sight of the Gentiles, to be their God."

5

There are many incidents one would like to mention : the Jewish laws—the oblations and sacrifices, covering all the various occasions of life with a mantle of grace. Peace offerings, offerings for sin and ignorance ; oblations for sins of injustice ; thank offerings, etc., indicating a clear perception of the necessity for signs and symbols : the outward sign of the inward grace. For these signs we cannot live without, not even in our everyday intercourse one with another. Social as well as spiritual life must fall to pieces without such things. They are the cement which keep the bricks together. A pile of loose bricks is not a habitable building.

The more one thinks, the more one sees the necessity. Why, even the little affair of meeting a friend—there must be the bow, or the hand-shake,

or the lifting of a hat—the outward sign of the inward courtesy.

But all these laws, deeply interesting though they be, must be left ; one must pass on—pass over battles, so devastating to their enemies, and so swift, so *safe* for themselves, whenever they were good Children—and over many other things as well. But I can scarcely pass without a word or a pat for Balaam's ass. It would seem like cutting an old friend. The ass which saw the angel, and got beaten three times for it, and only escaped with life because Balaam had no sword ; yet the ass throughout behaved with the utmost commonsense, edging first to this side, and then to the other, and finally fell down on the ground to save Balaam from the angel's wrath.

"I would I had a sword that I might kill thee," said the irate master.

And then it was that God opened the mouth of the ass, and the poor beast was able to put a little commonsense into the man's head. For, from that plaintive braying proceeded something which Balaam was able to understand. Facts became plain. Had the ass ever treated him so, until this present day, or ever before been a disobedient ass ? Never—no never. That little bit of imparted commonsense opened Balaam's eyes, and he too saw the angel. And then it was Balaam's turn to fall flat on the ground.

That ass is a great friend of mine ; positively he has helped me twice ; showing me at one time how independent is God's power of the material He uses ; and at another giving also to me some of that most necessary commonsense. Oh ! a very real friend indeed. I had another friend, but the

naughty little child became beatified and left the friendly circle. But one feels Balaam's ass is a fixture; one does not suppose anyone is going to canonize a donkey.

So we are partners, though I am kept well in my place. I am fully conscious that one of his forbears was present in the Manger ; that another carried Our Lady and the Divine Child ; and yet a third felt the gentle hand of Christ on the bridle, and heard the hosannas, and saw the palms. All this Balaam's ass, as it were, puts before me ; and it appears also as if there might be claimed some distant relationship, several times removed, with the body of St. Francis !

So you see, I am, in comparison, nowhere at all ; especially as I cannot prove that these distinguished animals were not necessarily real connections. But I admit that all this reflected glory does give to my nearly dumb friend almost a halo-ish look. Still, we remain partners ; and I can at least have the last word, because I happen not to be the sleeping one !

6

Before Moses died he blessed all the tribes of Israel.

As he gave that blessing, what scenes must have drifted across his mind : the sins of the Children—their ingratitude—those proud and stiff-necked ones, whom he so loved—soon to leave them, to see them no more. Drifting and changing scenes : God's promises, God's miracles, God's love—what memories !

Perhaps he would recall his own struggles and

weariness ; for Moses had known at times what it was to count the special favours he had received from God as an affliction—"Why hast Thou *afflicted* Thy servant ?"—Why had God laid the weight of all this people upon him—wherefore did he *find favour* before God ?—The cry of a weary heart, and a fainting life. How much that tells one of what the price had been.

For if the outward life of Moses was a difficult and exacting one, what must his spiritual life have been ; that life which God had clasped in His might, and with it, as it were, had written His record. How often he must have wished that he were an insignificant tent-pegger, or the least of the camel drivers, saying just ordinary prayers of praise and thanksgiving, night and morning—or even one of the murmurers.

God's gifts had been unlimited ; perhaps he would remember the very beginning of it all, when, long ago, he had stood before a burning bush with his rod in his hand. It was not that he had ever been unmindful of that extreme goodness of God—yet he *knew ;* knew from experience. It may be that God's greatest favours are never without their cost. And though at times the face of Moses had shone with such heavenly radiance, that the Children had feared to come near him, there had been for all that other times, and how many of them, when he had lain prone, in solitude, his face in the dust ; purchasing, with his sufferings, help and forgiveness for the sins of others.

From out of the pages of the Bible there seems to arise a very clear picture of Moses. He was a true mystic, bearing the sure sign of mystical prayer in his practical and capable life.

One sees him, blessing the Children for the last time. One sees the worn and gaunt figure, with mind alert, watchful to the end. One sees him very plainly—his skin, like fine old yellow parchment—his long flowing hair and beard—his eyes full of visions and kindliness, set, as it were, in a net-work of criss-cross lines—wrinkles of worries and smiles—and with one deep line between the eyebrows—a line of care and sorrow.

So looking on the Promised Land, he died.

"And there arose no more a prophet in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face."

CHAPTER VII

I

JUST a scrap about Jericho and its walls ; and about Josue (now the ruler of the Children) leading a silent company of armed men around those walls. They carried the Ark of the Covenant with them. For six days they marched silently round. Not a whisper was to pass their lips ; a dumb army, quiet as so many mice. There was not to be a sound, except for the seven priests blowing the seven trumpets.

Solemnly and silently, once each day, the procession wound itself around the wall until it had been round and round seven times. Uncanny it must have seemed to those within ; enough to give them the creeps.

But on the seventh day, rising early, they proceeded, not once, but seven times about that city. It took them all day. Evening had come when they commenced the seventh round. Then the trumpets changed to a longer and broken tune. It was a signal ; a signal that Israel was to shout. And Israel to a man shouted. It was a very great sound. It thundered in the ears of the multitude within ; for the power of God was in that shout, and at the sound of it the very walls turned dizzy, and as if bowing before that Supreme Command, forthwith fell down.

2

Out of that story came a sight of walls in general. An astonishing number of them, if once you begin to look ! Walls of churches, where one goes round and round before the pictures of Christ's Passion. At times, one might be a duster, cleaning the floor in patches ; but at other times, something falls suddenly there too, disclosing an undreamed-of spiritual city.

Walls which encase the lives of others, while one's prayers revolve around them. Terrible walls those, and terrible prayers, wearing skin off feet and hands and knees. Yet there must not be a sound. One must just go on in grim silence ; awaiting the longer note, and the broken tune—the falling of walls, the opening of eyes, the heavenly light of God's love, stealing into the closed soul—the bringing of a wonderful dawn.

3

After the death of Josue the Israelites often behaved very badly. They would sin and be chastised, and would repent and be delivered.

When Deborra and Jahal make their appearance, the Children had been oppressed by a king called Jaban for over twenty years. One rather likes both Jahal and Deborra, if for no other reason than that they did what had to be done promptly. It may not seem particularly nice of Jahal giving Sisara milk to drink with one hand, whilst killing him with the other. But there may have been more kindness in it than treachery. Supposing you had a dog you were fond of, and you were obliged to have him destroyed

because it was the best thing all round—for you, and the dog, and everyone else—you would not refuse him a drink if he were thirsty, or a warm sleep if he were tired—would you ? Would you not rather, if you could, dispatch him quickly while he slept so peacefully, with the touch of a familiar hand on his head ?

Besides, when there is a fight on, most people are either on one side or the other ; and Jahal was evidently on Barac's side. But she had no personal dislike of Sisara. He was thirsty, and she gave him to drink ; and being tired he lay down and she covered him with her cloak. While he slept she killed him. Yet his last conscious thought was of receiving a kindness.

If Jahal had not killed Sisara, why, Barac would—and Jahal knew this. Even then, was not Barac pursuing after Sisara—was he not already at the tent door ? She called him in. He would find in there the man he sought.

During times of war, and there were very war-like times, the life of the individual does not seem of much account—except to the individual.

Sisara's death at the hand of Jahal was possibly a more merciful death than it would have been at the hand of Barac ; and possibly Jahal knew this too.

4

It was Deborra's action that led to this battle which ended in Sisara's death.

Twenty years of oppression ! Deborra thought it was quite time that somebody did something ! She sent for Barac, and put a little courage into him. God, she told him, would fight for him, and would

deliver Jabin, and his general, Sisara, and all his chariots into Barac's hands. Barac said he would do it, but he had no mind to lose the stiffening properties belonging to Deborra. He told her quite plainly. "If thou wilt come with me I will go : If thou wilt not come, I will not go."

At once Deborra said she would go. She also told him that the victory would not belong to him, but to a woman ; Sisara would be delivered into the hands of a woman, and the victory would be hers. But it seems as if the victory belonged to the pair of them—to those two women. For could Jahal have slain Sisara if he had not been running away from Barac, or could Sisara have been running away from Barac if Deborra had not inspired Barac to fight against him ?

Though it was Jahal who hammered in that decisive stroke, it was Deborra who saw the swift blow before it was struck. Deborra had a way of seeing things like that—before they happened. Not that she was a witch, or anything in the least disreputable. It was merely that God sometimes gave her His sight. His divine foreknowledge would momentarily possess her soul. She would look at people, and see them, in a measure, as God sees them. In a fraction of a second, see everything about them, all at once ; see, as it were, *truth.*

Perhaps she was not altogether to be envied over this. It is difficult to imagine anything more uncomfortable, either for herself, or for the others ! But so it was.

Deborra and Jahal were both women of few words, and prompt action. There was, for them, no endless talking things over, and over, and over again. No flows of words, no wastes of time. Salutations.

CHAPTER VIII

I

THERE were many more delinquencies ; and then came Gedeon.

His work was threshing and cleaning wheat. Israel was again oppressed. Gedeon longed to escape ; but what hope was there ? He thought God had forsaken Israel. Of course he had heard all manner of wonderful stories ; of how the Children had been brought out of Egypt—of miracles, and all the rest of it. But it seemed far-away and long ago ; almost like so many fairy-tales. Nothing of the kind happened nowadays ; nothing but disasters and troubles.

Seven years ago it was since the Madianites had swarmed down upon the Israelites, and had pitched their tents amongst them, reaping what they had sown ; taking sheep and oxen. A multitude of men and camels, settling as a plague of locusts in all places ; leaving scarcely enough for the bare sustenance of life.

Seven years—and small chance of things ever getting any better. Gedeon would think things over as he threshed ; when he had the heart to think at all. Often he would work away, threshing and cleaning, without thoughts. He worked beneath the shade of an oak tree, for the work was tiring and the sun was hot.

One such day, working in his solitude beneath the

tree, the curious idea came to him that he was not alone. He paused, and looked about. The sun blazed down and the heat shimmered up—but nothing else. Not a sign of life other than his own. Not a leaf stirred, not a breath of wind. It seemed a motionless world, except for that vaporous upward trembling from the parched land.

Nevertheless, the impression remained that he was not alone. Foolishness.

How bright the light seemed beneath the tree where the dark, cool shade lay—curious that—a patch of brightness appearing where one could not see it properly, but off at an angle at one side—tantalizing—as if the sunlight had got into his eyes and was playing tricks with them. He turned to take a square look ; saw nothing but the tree with its deep shadow. Yet when he was not looking but just seeing, as it were, out of the corner of his eye—there it was. That was the absurd part about it. The lightness was there if he didn't look at it—but if he did—well, he couldn't, because it was not there any more.

Perhaps not foolishness ; but, yes, certainly elusive. For all that, it gave to him this curious feeling of wonderful companionship ; as if a friend were at his side. Best get on with his work and think no more of it.

In a second everything had changed. The wheat fell from his fingers . . . such a strange stillness within . . . the brightness was before him . . . it took form. He was *not* alone. As a "light-winged dryad" of the tree, there appeared an angel of the Lord.

Gedeon said, "Alas, my Lord God," for that was all that Gedeon could say.

With the coming of that heavenly vision he saw himself for the first time. Saw something dark and clumsy, and prone to evil. "Alas, my Lord God."

Yet in spite of this new sight, there was no fear. Peace was with him ; he might have been made of peace.

"Most valiant of men." It was unbelievable, but beyond doubt those words were addressed to him. Valiant, he ? He, a thresher of wheat, in servitude, with scarcely a hope left—he, valiant ? Why, he could have laughed, only he felt a bit too overawed. Not even valiant enough to risk laughing at himself !

The angel seemed totally unconscious of having made a mistake. Perhaps angels could not make mistakes ; but "valiant," well, really !

But there was yet another surprise for Gedeon. Something which this heavenly being had kept up its sleeve or under its wing, or within its radiance, or wherever angels do keep their surprises for mortals ; he was to go in all his strength and deliver Israel.

How was he, a mere nobody, to deliver Israel ? In his amazement beautiful words broke from him—words that reached Heaven, making possible those future enterprises of his.

"I beseech thee, wherewith shall I deliver Israel ? Behold my family is the meanest in Manasses ; and I am the least of my father's house."

Poor Gedeon ! he began to wonder if he dare trust himself at all ; whether he might not be suffering from what we call delusions.

Gedeon valiant ; Gedeon deliver Israel ! In his confusion he asked for a sign. A definite sign which would tell him whether it was he who had gone

mad or the angel—or neither. He asked if he might offer a sacrifice ; if he might fetch a kid and loaves ; and if the angel would wait until he came back. The angel would await his coming.

Gedeon was off like a shot ; and when he returned, he laid his offerings upon a rock beneath the tree.

That radiant being moved nearer. The light seemed to wave over Gedeon's altar, as if touching his sacrifice with a flaming caress. And, at this bright touch, to Gedeon's wonderment, everything vanished—loaves, kid, angel—everything.

He was alone once more, in the shadow of the oak, with his wheat.

Night found Gedeon back in his tent, but never had he been more wide-awake. And as he lay there, this came to him. The Israelites in their idolatry had erected an altar to Baal. Gedeon was to destroy that altar. It was, as it were, another sign, unasked for this time. The trees of the grove surrounding the altar to Baal were to be cut down ; and with the wood Gedeon was to build another altar—to build it on that very spot where everything had so suddenly vanished.

Gedeon, taking his servants with him, crept out under cover of the darkness ; too afraid of his father, indeed, too afraid of everybody to have dared it by daylight. Nor would he omit the smile this time . . . Gedeon, most valiant of men !

Next morning, what a stir in the camp !

What an asking of who had done this—neither was an answer long coming—it was Gedeon the son of Joas ; he did it. Did he ! Very well, Gedeon the son of Joas should be put to death. They went to his father about it ; and the father handled their

idolatry very prettily. The situation, so to speak, veered round and gave them a nip. Baal was a god. Was he in need of anyone to fight for him? Let Baal himself slay his adversary before to-morrow's light appeared. "If he be a god," the father concluded, "let him revenge himself on him that hath cast down his altar."

Gedeon lived. Not only lived, but the spirit of courage filled him. Commanding, sounding the trumpet, calling his house together, sending messengers here, there and everywhere. The people came to him from all parts and followed him.

Gedeon was leading an army!

But it was for him throughout a terrible affair. One moment he was all right, and the next all wrong. Gedeon's behaviour towards God was that of a spoilt child towards an indulgent parent. God cared for him very tenderly; He knew what a thresher would feel like with Israel to deliver.

When children are playing, you know the way they have of showing off to grown-ups; ever so brave, full of importance . . . see me jump, Mummie —Auntie, watch me throw this ball—Oh, look Daddy, oh, *do* look at me being a train! Then some slight accident, some little fright, maybe only the arrival of a stranger, and the great valiant performer is the tiny cry-baby again, running for protection, clinging for shelter.

Well, that was Gedeon all over. In the all-right moments he would be blowing trumpets, rallying men—fine fellow, Gedeon then. But in the all-wrong moments his courage would drop lower than his boots; and he would be running off to God for a spoiling, the big man become a little weedling babe, telling God he was frightened, asking God to

comfort him ; putting out his fleece and saying exactly what he wanted God to do ! In the morning might there be dew, only on the fleece, and not on the rest of the ground. If God would do this, Gedeon could be quite sure that his hand should deliver Israel.

In the morning the dew was on the fleece, and the ground was dry.

But Gedeon, like a spoilt child, wanted it all over again—the other way round this time, please, to make quite sure—fleece dry, and the ground wet with dew.

And God encouraged him and did that night as Gedeon requested.

The fleece was dry, but the ground was covered with dew.

2

Gedeon gathered together a mighty army. He was playing for safety. He wanted to make a clean sweep of these Madianites.

Yet it seems as if God intended keeping him down to that lovely lowliness of his ; lest leading this powerful army to victory Gedeon should glory in his own strength.

It was as if God would have none of it. The army was too big. Two and twenty thousand men were sent home. Still too many. Gedeon obediently dismissed nearly another ten thousand.

At last, a mere handful of men—only three hundred of them—they went into battle.

The enemy were trapped and beaten, slaying each other in the stampede, "howling" as they fled away.

3

The fighting finished, one finds the gentle Gedeon again ; turning away wrath, with his peaceful manner, and mild words.

The men of Ephraim had not been called out to fight ; and they were exceedingly angry about it. What was Gedeon thinking of, that he had not called the Ephraimites when he went to war against Madian ? Gedeon did not go into a lengthy explanation—that he had too much army as it was—but he answered them with gentleness.

"What could I have done like to that which you have done ? Is not one bunch of grapes of Ephraim better than a vintage of Abiezer ? What could I have done like to what you have done ?"

How gentle, how appeasing. How could anyone go on bristling when they were buttered up, and stroked down like that. No wonder God loved Gedeon with his gentle, confiding ways.

Almost the last words we hear him speak are full of his sweet humility and of grateful remembrance to the Lord their God, who had carried them "as a man is wont to carry his little son, all the way that you have come, until you came to this place."

The Children wanted Gedeon to rule over them ; and his son after him, and his son's son ; because he had freed them from the hand of Madian.

But Gedeon thought otherwise. He said : "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you : but the Lord shall rule over you."

And those are nearly the last words which are recorded of Gedeon's.

CHAPTER IX

I

"After this he loved a woman . . . and she was called Dalila."

At the close of his life Samson might have said that those words told his whole story. All the same, "after this" implies a before. Perhaps almost forgotten by Samson at the end. Anyway of little importance compared with the darkness of blindness, the helplessness of weakness.

Yet it had been happy enough. A young man of great physical strength. It made him joyous, he exulted in it. He tore up lions as easily as an ordinary person would have torn up an envelope. Only there is no fun in tearing up a bit of paper, whilst there must be heaps of excitement in dealing with a roaring beast.

In those days the Philistines had dominion over Israel. Israel was without a king, and "everyone did that which seemed right to himself," until this young giant came along, and through sheer strength of muscle set himself to be their judge and ruler. The Philistines feared him, but they never loved him.

In spite of his easy-going and pleasure-loving nature, they could not get rid of him, try as they would. His strength was always just one too many for them ; it was this strength which always had the last word.

Perhaps by cunning they could outwit strength.

Once, they thought they had fairly caught him. He slept for a night at Gaza. Guards were set at the gates of the city. The gates were bolted and barred. They would surprise and kill him as he went out in the morning. But Samson was off and away before morning. The closed gates he took in his stride, shouldering them along with him, a clean sweep—posts, bolts, bars and gates—carrying them along as so many playthings, and dumping the whole lot on the top of a hill, when he was tired of the sight of them.

Evidently it was no use trying to outwit a man with strength like that. And what was the use of conspiring against one who was as good as an army in himself? Why, he had been known to slay thousands with the jaw-bone of an ass. Get rid of his strength ; that was the thing to do. Get this rather quiet giant to give away the secret of it—ah, well—and she was called Dalila.

A thoroughly nasty, horrid thing, Dalila. Each one of the princes of the Philistines promised to give her eleven hundred pieces of silver if she would find out wherein Samson's strength lay.

Everyone knows she did find out ; everyone knows that at last Samson told her : God had hung it in his hair, "to show how slight the gift."

Dalila—unscrupulous, vain, perfumed, bedecked, "with all her streamers waving in the wind," oh, Dalila would do anything for money. She stood by, well content, while the Philistines seized Samson ; watched him bound—saw, unmoved, his eyes put out.

No more love-making for Dalila now ; only a hasty gathering together of those ill-gotten coins.

One hopes, later, she was present at the festival,

when all the princes and people assembled to offer sacrifices to their gods. Samson could never trouble them again ; they could afford to make a mock of him. Blind and weak, he should be led out of prison and brought to their festival. They would make merry at his expense.

But the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had not forgotten Israel. Nor had He forgotten the hairs of Samson's head. Perhaps not actually numbering them, though certainly not unmindful. For during the weary imprisonment Samson's hair had been growing ! And once again that slight, yet confounding, gift of strength lay entangled within its unusual environment. Brought into that large hall packed with men and women, Samson was made to stand between two pillars.

And laying hold of both pillars, with one piercing cry, one mighty roar from that great throat : "Lord God, remember me," one terrific shrug of those huge shoulders. . . .

One is still hoping that Dalila was there ! With her streamers, and her scent, and her silver—there, when the house fell upon the multitude ; when God settled Samson's account as he died among the Philistines.

2

You told me the other day that you are hazy about Ruth. But are you hazy about the picture we had of her when we were children ?

As incorrect in detail as it was possible to be. Ruth depicted in a sort of polonaise—a sort of half-hearted crinoline. Probably painted in the days when skirts were worn bunchy, and the artist

thought that Ruth might as well be in the fashion. But we liked it. Do you catch sight of it again—a printed top, with a red underskirt?

It was not that Ruth's character was popular with us; how could it be—such a paragon? One of those pattern people who did everything that was right and nothing that was wrong. She made one feel out of it, Ruth did. I used to think of her as Miss Ruth. And the "Miss" was not used as a term of respect either. All the same, one had sentimental moments over her. She looked rather nice in the picture. . . . Ruth gleaning, very unobtrusively, behind the others.

Since then one has realized that people who never do wrong are not so annoying after all; they occur so seldom, and give so little trouble when they do.

Lately I heard rather an amusing remark on this very subject: somebody objected to somebody else because they were "too holy, it got on one's nerves." Not being in the conversation, I could not interrupt. But I would have liked to say that it was not because they were too holy, it was rather because they were not holy enough. When holiness gets on the nerves, it is fairly safe to query it. Holiness does not set the nerves on edge; in fact, it is too inconspicuous for the nerves to know it is there. It is about the least noticeable thing in the world; a something one cannot put a finger on; a something which pervades a life; something one likes to be with; perhaps a gentleness, an encouragement, a sweetness, a restfulness. Something less than aggression, something more than scapulars and medals and queer poses for prayer; a quiet moving in a very soothing direction, always heavenward. Too holy? Too holy!

A cat knows that no *proper* stroke—nothing which could be called "stroking the cat"—can be given from tail to head ; the fur must not be rubbed up the wrong way. So it is with holiness. It must move in the right direction. No, I've not forgotten Ruth—now Miss Ruth no longer. She certainly had endearing qualities. Think of her mother-in-law ! Why, the very expression is almost a joke. Then think of Ruth's mild determination of going wherever her mother-in-law went ; dwelling wherever she should dwell ; sheltering beneath the omnipotence of Noemi's God.

"For whithersoever thou shalt go, I will go ; and where thou shalt dwell, I also will dwell. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

Unusual words to address to a mother-in-law.

But Ruth loved Noemi. And so, after Noemi had lost her children, and Ruth her husband, they journeyed back to Bethlehem together—back to Noemi's tribe.

Now there was living in Bethlehem a kinsman of Noemi's, a powerful man, and very rich, whose name was Boaz. He took a liking to Ruth from the moment he saw her. And every time he saw her, he liked her more and more ; and every time he spoke to her, he promised her something better and better.

It went like this : permission to reap in his fields, following *after* the reapers, picking up what they had left behind. Permission to drink of the water his servants carried. Little grateful speeches from Ruth—Boaz melting like wax. Permission to come hither, and to eat of the bread, and to dip her morsel in the vinegar. A command to his servants when they

saw Ruth a-gleaning, to drop a few handfuls of corn on purpose. A steady crescendo of generosity towards the gentle stranger who had placed herself under the wings of the God of Israel ; and also both figuratively and literally, beneath the feet of Boaz.

A few more preliminaries and Boaz had taken to wife Ruth the Moabite.

Nor did Ruth forget her mother-in-law. For when a child was born to her, she put her baby in Noemi's arms—so long empty.

This child was the father of Isai, who was the father of David.

CHAPTER X

I

WHILE Samuel was as yet very young, his mother, Anna, sang a song of thanksgiving to God, because she was so very happy about her little son.

Pleasant it is to be happy, and beautiful it is to thank God for it. And safe beyond words it is to thank Him at all times for everything. Whether it be over small material delights, such as the warmth of sunshine—the soft cool breeze ; or over the bigger affairs of the soul—spiritual ease, or the reverse ! There is safety and joy in knowing that whatever happens we *dare* always be thankful, because God's loving-kindness is around us. Unquestioning trust is spiritual freedom. It teaches us, in a back-handed manner, how happy we shall be in Heaven. When, without doubt or effort, we shall understand the cause of our joy.

"Samuel" means "asked of God." Anna had asked God for a son, and He gave her a darling. Anna said for this child she had prayed and her petition had been granted ; therefore she also would lend him to the Lord all the days of his life.

And he grew in grace, and became "great before God" ; though nobody knew how much God loved little Samuel ; nor did little Samuel know it himself. "The word of the Lord was precious in those days : there was no manifest vision" ; nothing

at all to indicate to the child nor to anyone else that God would summon him and that one day those small hands would anoint Saul and David, bringing the kings back to Israel.

Samuel was a steadfast little person, performing diligently his duties in the Temple. Surrounded by wickedness, he remained unspotted.

Heli the priest was growing old, and his eyes were growing dim. No longer could he see the Sanctuary lamp. He deputed Samuel to tend the holy light ; he should sleep in the Temple where the Ark of God was.

Alone with his twinkling night-light, Samuel slept his deep, quiet sleep . . . till One who loves little children called him. . . . Asleep though he was, fast off, Samuel heard ; heard that innermost call of God to the soul, without as yet knowing 'twas God who called.

He tumbled up, thinking the priest wanted him : "Here am I," he said, "for thou didst call me." No, Samuel was mistaken, Heli had not called him. "Go back and sleep," said the priest. Very willingly Samuel went back and slept.

Again that cry : "Samuel, Samuel."

Again he ran, with his, "Thou calledst me."

The priest, dozing himself, patient and kind as he was, could scarcely help wishing the child would not walk about in his sleep saying somebody had called him. And once more he told him to return and sleep.

A third time there came that insistent cry, "Samuel, Samuel."

"Thou *didst* call me," said little Samuel.

Then Heli understood. He caught the puzzled enquiry in the boy's voice—if Heli had not called,

then who . . ., he caught the look of the other world on the child's face. Mysteriously he said to Samuel, "Go and sleep, if He should call thee any more. . . ."

"Samuel, Samuel."

There was nothing in the world now but that one word—his name.

Samuel—Samuel—Samuel.

Falling on his knees, forgetful of the everyday, of the familiar—forgetful of the world he lived in—wrapt in blessedness, at last Samuel answered God.

A very tiny little Samuel, in a very tiny little voice, whispered: "Speak, Lord, for thy servant *heareth*."

2

A priest once told me that when he was very young, whilst staying in a house where the Blessed Sacrament was reserved, he got up in the dead of night, and groped his way to the chapel—all dark, save for the flickering Sanctuary lamp.

One does not know exactly what happened there. Perhaps the child scarcely knew himself—a communion of love—the soul's canticle of canticles—an ageless song—but in some sweet silent fashion God spoke to that little kneeling figure, and called him to be a priest.

The watchful care of God finds all little Samuels ! This little figure knew very well he ought not to have been where he was. He ought to have been in bed.

He said, "Dear Lord, I'm very sorry I'm here, but if I get the chance, I'll come again."

He rose from his knees and crossed the Sanctuary, on his journey back towards that spot where he ought to have been. Reaching the door, quietly he

opened it. For one second he paused ; one farewell, affectionate glance. It was as if the Sanctuary Lamp had taken up that little song : "He will come again —come again," it sang. And all the polished surfaces took up the theme ; a silent fugue, the lamp conducting and directing with its fleeting rays, catching a candlestick, darting at an altar rail, falling on the Tabernacle. The fugue and counterpoint would continue throughout the night, "come again—again—come again."

The little boy softly closed the door.

3

Again were the Philistines at war against Israel. The Israelites were defeated. The cause of their defeat lay within their own perverse hearts. Forgotten was their God—forgotten was the Ark of the Covenant. They had become what might be called advanced. They were beyond the stupid customs and foolish superstitions of their forebears. What was the use of carrying into battle a sort of glorified box ? Could they not fight as well without it ?

Fight they did, but with such disastrous results that in a panic they went flying off to fetch the Ark of God. It was panic, but it was not contrition ; God will not be mocked. In the following battle, not only were they defeated, but the Ark was captured. The glory had departed from Israel.

This changing hands of the Ark of the Covenant hit both ways. It taught the Philistines a lesson as well as the Israelites. But in the first flash of victory the Philistines were very well pleased with themselves over this capture. The Ark was brought

to a city called Azotus, and was placed within the temple of Dagon—the idol they worshipped. And they set the Ark of God beside the image of Dagon.

On entering the temple next morning, the figure of Dagon was prone upon the ground before the Ark of the Lord.

It was rather disconcerting. Never had Dagon behaved like this before. They picked him up and put him back in his place. But the next day, there he was again, face downwards before the Ark ; and, oh, tragic affair, his head was severed from his body, and both hands were cut off.

The people of Azotus were scared. Then sickness broke out among them ; the city was in confusion ; there was a great mortality. Azotus was of one mind about the Ark : it could not stay with them. The Philistines might do whatever they liked with it, but Azotus washed its hands of the Ark.

In fact, nobody seemed particularly anxious to keep this trophy of war ; still, seeing it was a trophy, of course, something had to be done with it ! One could not exactly discard a trophy of war, however perilous. So it was decided it should be carried about from place to place. And upon every city and village, whithersoever it was taken, the hand of God came—plague and desolation. The fear of death was over the land of the Philistines. Ultimately, the people petitioned for its removal from their midst: "Send away the Ark of the God of Israel ; and let it return to its own place, and not kill us and our own people."

All the leaders were called together, in order to decide what was the best thing to do ; how the Ark was to be sent back, etc. Finally an arrangement was arrived at. The Ark was to be placed on

a cart drawn by oxen ; nor was it to be sent away empty. At the side of it was to be a golden box, with golden offerings. In this manner they were to give glory to the mighty God of Israel, "and render unto him for sin."

The oxen were to be free, were to choose their own way. The people were to watch ; if the oxen went by way of the coast, towards Bethsames, where the Israelites dwelt, then the Philistines would indeed know their punishment had come from the God of Israel. But should the oxen wander in any other direction—away from Israel—"we shall know that it is not His hand hath touched us, but it has happened by chance."

The moment for departure came. Without hesitation the oxen took the coast road, leading straight to Bethsames ; turning neither to the right nor to the left, lowing as they went.

Around Bethsames, the people working in the fields heard the lowing of the kine as they approached. Looking up, they saw an undriven cart upon the road. And, lo, upon it, the golden Ark of the Covenant.

There was great rejoicing. The priests came to take the Ark from off the cart ; they saw the little box of gold at the side—the news spread like wildfire—something new—something placed there by the Philistines—whatever could it be ? This time, their downfall was not panic, but curiosity. The Ark was a holy thing, to be worshipped with reverence. The Children should have been thanking God for giving back the Glory to Israel ; acknowledging their past sins of forgetfulness. But there they were, crowding round to have a look. Idle and unrestrained curiosity !

Swiftly God struck. Their turn now to fear the Ark. "Who shall be able to stand before the Lord this holy God?" Their turn to send messengers, asking for its removal. "The Philistines have brought back the Ark of the Lord. Come ye down and fetch it up to you."

And the men of Cariathiarim came for the Ark and carried it away, treated it with reverence, and listened to Samuel (a child no longer) as he called Israel back to God.

CHAPTER XI

I

It was the hands of Samuel which anointed both Saul and David.

Difficult to write about Saul, but there it is ; one cannot write about David and ignore Saul, in spite of the fact that the name of David is perhaps more popularly linked with those of Jonathan, and Absalom, and even Goliath. Yet Saul is across his path so frequently that he cannot be completely stepped over.

If I could draw, I would make a picture of a zebra—write beneath it "Saul-like," and be done with it ; so striped with black and white is his character. And then there is his madness, the coming and going kind. Everyone has a tendency to be a problem ; but the tendency is increased when plus madness there is an inflated ego.

When Saul was sane he loved David, and when he was mad he hated him ; though how far this hatred was madness or how far jealousy, who can say? Many a time David could charm away this evil spirit with his magic tunes, and Saul would be refreshed and cleansed by the music.

. . . .

When Tiger Tim was recovering from that long illness, a new street musician arrived. Occasionally

he came, playing in the street below. She loved it.

Lindsey said it was like David, who refreshed the spirit of *somebody* with his harp playing—but *whose* spirit, none of us knew. Various spirits were suggested, but nobody knew for certain. Well, now we know—it was Saul's.

The harpist has not altogether deserted us ; from time to time he visits the gardens with melody. When his fingers ripple along the strings, I am once more up in that top room, with a most entertaining little invalid—still, to me, it is David refreshing the Tiger. Yet Tim is flitting about the world . . . and the soul of David . . . ? and, after all, it is only a poor old man playing the harp in the street. Though were it David himself, could he charm what is there no longer ?

I am wondering how far I can be held responsible for all these many digressions. Things are forever happening, and one thing does suggest another.

Can it be altogether my fault, "when through a thousand eyes Heaven is gleaming "?

Certain it is that Samuel was fond of Saul, whatever he made of his zebra-like characteristics. For when he had to banish him from his life, Samuel mourned Saul.

Saul was evidently all right before he was made King, "not a goodlier person than he." As Samuel reminded him later on, the Lord had anointed him King over Israel, when he was little in his own eyes. And Saul had been sent on his way, with definite instructions from Samuel. But Saul was not obedient—too anxious to be popular. It was not long before Samuel had to ask him, "What hast thou done ?" and to remind him that he had done

foolishly because he had not kept the commandment of his God. If only Saul had been more docile, Samuel said, the kingdom of Saul would have been established over Israel.

Soon afterwards Samuel had again to reprove Saul ; for again Saul had been disobediently showing off, and pandering to the people : "Doth the Lord desire holocausts and victims, and not rather that the voice of the Lord should be obeyed ? For obedience is better than sacrifice," in fact, obedience is the highest offering that anyone can ever make to God. It was, however, a pill that Saul could not swallow.

In their final interview Samuel said these terrible words to Saul : "Because it is like the sin of witchcraft to rebel : and like the crime of idolatry to refuse to obey. Forasmuch therefore as thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, the Lord hath also rejected thee from being King."

What a horrible position for Samuel ! It is quite bad enough to be obliged to give notice to a servant, but just fancy having to give notice to a king !

2

Samuel went to Bethlehem and there saw Isai ; for it had been revealed to Samuel that among the sons of Isai he would find Israel's future king. He explained his errand to Isai, and seven of his sons were called before Samuel. Fine young men, of whom the father was duly proud. What a regal king any of the seven would make. No doubt he was disappointed when Samuel said the Lord had not chosen any one of these.

Samuel was puzzled. "Are here all thy sons?" he asked.

"There remaineth yet a young one who keepeth the sheep." But the words were full of diffidence—a mere boy who tended the flocks. What about David's manners? Scarcely a regal bearing his—just a country bumpkin.

"Send and fetch him," said Samuel to Isai.

And presently he came, aglow with the freshness of sun and earth, and beautiful to behold; and Samuel knew that this was the one God had chosen.

He arose and anointed David King.

No sooner does one begin about David, than one has to return to Saul. His kingship gone, he became subject to those awful attacks of his; a brooding and morose man, with self-pity staring after lost power. His melancholy settled upon him like an evil spirit, and to disperse such gloom was no easy proposition. His servants knew him to be fond of music. Might they fetch a musician? They knew a skilful player, David, the son of Isai. And that is how and why David came to Saul.

David, with his harp, playing; Saul, with his bitter thoughts, listening; till notes and thoughts found a meeting place of enchanting rest, and Saul forgetting self, forgot the evil within him, and for a while would be at peace.

3

Things were at a deadlock on account of Goliath.

Arrayed for battle were two armies. The Philistines were gathered on one mountain and the Israelites on another. Between the armies lay a valley; and walking about in this valley was

Goliath ; and he had it all to himself. Twice daily he walked out into it, challenging the Israelites. Let them send down a man to fight him hand to hand ; if this man could kill him, then would the Philistines serve Israel ; but if he, Goliath, should kill the Israelite, then must Israel serve the Philistines.

The challenge of Goliath of Geth remained unanswered. Saul and the Children of Israel were dismayed at his strength ; they were afraid.

Armed from tip to toe, carrying a wonderful sword, out he came, morning and evening, swaggering about in the valley ; yet not one of Saul's army dare meet him in single combat.

When Saul had left his home to go and sit on his hill, David had returned to mind his father's sheep. But the three eldest sons of Isai had followed Saul. After a while David's father called him from the sheep, and told him to go along to the camp and see how his brothers were getting on—if they were well—to take them presents.

Behind his words lay hidden thoughts. Had he not heard of this boastful, truculent Goliath ? Did he not know that none of his three sons had ventured to meet him ? And had he not seen with his own eyes Samuel anoint David, his youngest ? If God had truly chosen David, might it not be that He would let him deliver Israel from their present shame ? Isai would not mention these thoughts to the boy, but what harm could it do if he sent David trotting off to enquire about his brothers ?

So David went to the place of battle. Leaving the gifts he had brought with the baggage-keeper, he sought out his brothers, enquiring if all went well with them. As he was speaking to them, out came

Goliath calling any man to contest. David heard what Goliath said ; also he saw Israel crawling away out of sight, through fear.

David was asked what he thought of this Philistine, and of his daily taunting reproach to the Israelites. David did not say what he thought ; but he made many enquiries. Who was this base-born that he should defy the armies of the living God ? What reward would there be for the man who would defeat him ? Riches, he was told, great riches ; and the daughter of the king would be the conqueror's bride. (The " king," meaning Saul, for how could they know as yet that this young shepherd was their king ?)

David passed from one to another with his questions ; always he heard the same story.

Would his old father be praying for his son the while ? Perhaps, more than likely.

But David's brothers were none too pleased. They guessed at once what David was up to. If they had not the courage to fight Goliath, they certainly had no mind that anyone else should ; and they had met this youngest brother of theirs before. They asked him, none too politely, what he was doing there ; why was he not looking after those few sheep of his in the desert ?

David wanted to know what he had done amiss ; and then, with his eyes fixed on that shouting figure in the valley, he asked another question : "Is there not cause to speak ?" and his look told them, even more plainly than his words, that the daily exhibition of Goliath must cease. Consternation ! David was but a boy—Goliath a warrior from his youth. Supposing this foolhardy David were to accept the challenge so ridiculously unequal. Assuredly David

would be killed, and Israel would be in servitude. Agitation ! Saul must be warned. These alarming misgivings were communicated to him ; and he sent for David. Saul was not long left in doubt as to David's intention. He said to Saul, "Let not any man's heart be dismayed in him. I, thy servant, will go and will fight against the Philistine."

Yet Saul tried to dissuade him, until David, taking Saul into his confidence, told of his own strength, and of how he had come by it, whilst keeping his father's sheep, away in those lonely desert places and quiet pasturing lands. Acknowledging his strength as an asset, filled with hope and courage, yet placing his entire confidence in God's help. Not by his own prowess would he be saved, but God would deliver him out of the hand of the Philistine.

Saul was convinced. "Go, and the Lord be with thee," he said. There were arrangements to be made ; David's outfit to be considered. One senses the merriment of this little private rehearsal : Saul as audience, and David as the unwieldy performer. David must at all costs look like a warrior. He must wear Saul's garments, be clothed with a coat of mail, a helmet on his head, and girded with a sword.

Into all these things Saul strapped and buckled David. Oh, wait a moment, he must see if he could move, or walk about ; he was not accustomed to such unyielding accoutrement. He clinked and clanked up and down in it, but he could make nothing of it—besides, the sword was inclined to trip him up. Fight ? Why, he could not even walk properly ; and the helmet made him feel a self-conscious idiot. Who would take him for a gallant warrior—rather, a clumsy fool—a laughing-stock he would be.

"I cannot go thus," he said to Saul, "I am not used to it."

Let him get out of these things. Give him his staff and his shepherd's scrip ; give him five smooth stones from the brook to put in it—give him a sling in his hand . . .

And so it came to pass that the insolent Philistine found someone awaiting him in the valley. Goliath looked on David, despised him, and cursed him.

"Am I a dog," he cried, "that thou cometh to me with a staff?"

David could scarcely explain his own late experiences with a sword ; though there might flash through the boy's brain an instinctive admiration for Goliath's easy bearing, among so many difficulties of apparel—the sword, actually, hanging where it should, instead of catching between the feet !

Goliath, with his unpleasant remarks, drew nearer.

"Come to me," he threatened, "and I will give thy flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the earth."

And David said to Goliath : "Thou cometh to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield ; but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, which thou hast defied. This day the Lord will deliver thee into my hand, and I will slay thee, and take away thy head from thee. . . ."

Lightly and nimbly David ran towards Goliath. Lovingly his fingers passed along the sling. Deftly he extracted a stone from his scrip. Swiftly, sling and stone whirled away on their deadly errand. And Goliath, with the stone in his head, was dead

upon the ground. Standing over Goliath, David drew his enemy's sword from its sheath. . . .

Then David returned to Saul, appearing before him with the head of the Philistine in his hand.

4

David's life ! His adventures ! Wherever one dips one can pull out a handful !

Perhaps David would have preferred to remain a shepherd. It is not everyone who craves for excitement. Some of us are for a quiet life, and appreciate the monotony of routine, with its copious dreamy opportunities.

I would like best to be a *very* old peasant, with a past like an unruffled lake ; hobbling along daily to hear Mass ; where there were no motors and no noise ; saying the rosary with as many distractions as you please, and knowing quite well that such things matter little, because God is so tenderly good. Yet our destinies are with Him, and He uses us as He pleases, whilst our necessities are ever before Him. And David's circumstances—as are those of the rest of us—were the best possible for his own particular sanctification.

Stepping-stones to Heaven, though they be rugged and high and perilous, are nevertheless stepping-stones—and what else matters, except to step. Whether we have to ford a gentle brook, or negotiate a mountain pass, all that is vital is that we *do it.*

The rest is with God—in every sense !

Well, David had one youthful glimpse of quiet pasture land ; but never again ! Ever afterwards his life was cast into that fine-grinding heavenly

mill ; with his love and his sin, his joys and his sorrows—and his God.

There was his friendship with Jonathan. When a first impression is correct, it is lasting. As the eyes of David and Jonathan met, their souls were knit. Affinity.

Friendship is an affinity. Nothing more is needed, and nothing less will suffice. Difference in age or of position does not count. Separation leaves it untouched ; five minutes or five years is all one ; the friendship is resumed exactly where it left off. It does not necessarily come at a glance. The ways may be devious, the speed varying. But no sooner is the affinity discovered than the friendship is established.

Between David and Jonathan there must have been a very real affinity, for it does not appear that they met often or for long. Swift, secret meetings—the hurried anxious warnings of Jonathan : "Look to thyself . . . be hid," the worried bewilderment of David : "What have I done ? . . . what is my sin against thy father, that he seeketh my life ?"

Jonathan's rather broken encouragement : "God forbid, thou shalt not die."

And David's brave facing of facts : "Truly as the Lord liveth, and thy soul liveth, there is but one step (as I may say) between me and death." And always their covenant of love : "Whatsoever thou shalt say to me, I will do for thee."

Meetings full of anxiety and tenderness. And their last meeting—though neither knew it, save for some dim prophetic beating of the heart, which made them cling together, weeping. Their farewell words : "The Lord be between me and thee . . . ."

Down the centuries, wheresoever pure love is found—the world has whispered their names.
David and Jonathan.

5

Saul's part : hatred and jealousy growing apace ; fluctuations, short-lived remorse. In many ways he tried to bring about David's death. With his own spear. Sending him away fighting, hoping he would be killed in battle. Laying innumerable traps ; in the end, openly asking his servants to slay him. But the spear missed its mark ; wars returned him safe and sound—victorious, and the idol of the people ; and there were always those timely warnings from Jonathan.

Yet finally David had to go ; he fled to the mountains and caves and woods, where Saul pursued him, as if he were hunting some poor animal. Several times they met at close quarters. On one of these occasions David enquired point blank what Saul thought he was doing. Did the King of Israel think he was hunting a dog or a flea, he asked, not without humour. Whenever they met Saul repented of his anger ; the very sound of David's voice melted him ; the very sight of that boyish figure filled him with shame at his own venom.

Saul knew well enough where the trouble lay. He was jealous—jealous of the love betwixt David and Jonathan—jealous of David's popularity with the people. And this jealousy was precisely what David never could or did understand.

Twice when they met David could have slain Saul. But David would not raise his arm to strike ; contenting himself, the first time, with a proof that

he could have killed his pursuer ; and presenting to Saul afterwards a portion of the hem of his own robe, which David had cut off when Saul had not guessed that David was near him.

And the second time : Saul and his guards were awakened from their sleep by David calling to them. He was upbraiding the guard for not having kept a better watch. "There came one to kill thy lord," he cried, "and now, where is the King's spear, and the cup of water which was at his head ?" Surely when Saul saw these things were in David's hands, he would believe in his integrity ; surely Saul could no longer listen to those stories against his servant David, for were not the spear and the cup proofs of his good-will ?

And Saul, awakening, knew the familiar voice. "Is that thy voice, my son David ?"

David answered : "It is my voice, my lord."

Then came his usual pitiful, perplexed question : "What have I done, or what evil is there in my hand ? Wherefore doth my lord persecute his servant ?"

And Saul said : "I have sinned. Return, my son David, and I will no more do thee harm, because my life hath been precious in thy eyes this day."

But David had lost confidence, or gained common-sense, whichever way you like to look at it ; anyway, his heart misgave him. He came to a decision : "I shall one day or other fall into the hands of Saul. Is it not better for me to flee, and to be saved in the land of the Philistines, that Saul may despair of me, and cease to seek me in all the coasts of Israel ?"

Saul had vacillated once too often.

6

About the Psalms. Some years ago I wrote on the back of a card I gave to Tiger Tim this verse from the Psalms : "For by thee I shall be delivered from temptation ; and through my God I shall go over a wall."

No explanation needed for writing it, I suppose ?

Tig read it with knitted brows. She said in a very businesslike voice, "Over a wall—a *wall !*" I nodded. After consideration, she elucidated : if the wall were not too utterly high, if, in fact, it were negotiable, she hoped she would have on her gardening kit, and not be hampered by a skirt. But should the wall prove unscaleable? "Why," she added, "O ! for the wings—give me wings—give me wings !"

Materialized, or spiritualized ?

Turning poetry into prose may be to find the meaning of the words with a vengeance !

The Tiger would do all she could ; what she could not do, God must do for her.

Is there any doubt about God's understanding ? or that He would supply the dove-like flight ?

I don't know whether I fear to rush in where angels would think twice about it ; but I do fear to tread on David's poetry ! It is one thing to watch his busy life ; another to listen to his song.

A poet whose harp and songs were his prayers. It was for him a necessity to find an escape for the whirl of entrancing beauty and anguish of his thoughts. Throughout his life, he sang. At the crystal dawn, in the noontide heat, beneath stars at night—singing his way through life—canticles to the Beloved.

"Unto Thee, O my helper, will I sing, for Thou art God my defence : my God, my mercy."

Leaping or soaring, aflame with divine love, or dashing himself to dust, but never insipid moderation.

"Save me, O God, for the waters are come over me, even into my soul. Thou knowest my reproach, my confusion and my shame."

Or else he is shouting "with joy to God." The discreet middle-course is unknown to David. He and his words are never, as it were, in the easy chair. His very calmness, in its serenity, is extreme.

"The Lord ruleth me : and I shall want nothing. He hath set me in a place of pasture.

"He hath brought me up on the water of refreshment: He hath converted my soul. . . . For though I should walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will fear no evils, for Thou art with me."

And he is forever singing a "new song." Oh, a new song—he has not yet been able to say all that is so clear in his mind, yet so stumbling in words. He has missed the sublime loveliness of divine truth—oh, a new song, a new song. David's exuberance, his excessive grief, his almost wild rejoicings, are merely the result of his realization of God's stupendousness. Always he is at grips with a living God.

The God of David is not some encrusted deity, whom it is as well to propitiate, lest he bestir himself, and inconveniently interfere with the daily routine ; and otherwise a negligible quantity. David's soul was tremulous with an ecstasy of fear and love before a Supreme Being. He sang of transcendent joy, and grief, and hope . . . inspired with a vision—sometimes he sang strange words ; words beyond his own understanding—a mirage, reflected within

the desert of his soul, the living water of everlasting life ; revelation—the coming of the Redeemer, even Christ our Lord.

David *knew*. David *saw*. Something tragic, yet glorious. There was darkness. But there would be light.

7

When David left the Israelites and went into his voluntary exile among the Philistines, he soon made friends. It was that engaging manner of his—his desire to please. However, he only remained with them a few months. Events happened which caused him to return to his own people.

He was publicly anointed King ; for Saul and his sons were slain. Saul, wounded in battle, unable to escape, fell upon his sword, and died.

A messenger brought the news to David. He had been absent on an excursion of his own, and was returning when he saw the man approaching—dust strewn upon his head, his garments rent.

"From whence cometh thou ?" David asked.

He said : "I am fled out of the camp of Israel."

David enquired what was the matter, what had come to pass? The dust on the head, the torn garments—ominous signs. "Tell me," he said.

And the messenger told David what he feared and dreaded to hear.

"The people are fled from the battle ; and many of the people are fallen and dead."

How poor David's heart would knock against his ribs, the colour fly to his cheeks.

"Moreover . . ."

Would the fateful words never be said ? Was it

seconds or years that those rent clothes, and ashes, had stood before him?

"Moreover, Saul and Jonathan, his son, are dead."

How poor David's heart would falter and miss the beat, the blood drain away from his face, leaving it pinched and grey.

One last defence against this tide of grief: "How knowest thou that Saul and Jonathan his son are dead?" But what need to ask. Even now the diadem from Saul's head, and the bracelet from Saul's arm were at David's feet.

"And David made this kind of lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan, his son.

"The illustrious of Israel are slain upon the mountain: How are the valiant fallen? Tell it not in Geth, publish it not in the streets of Ascalon. . . . Saul and Jonathan . . . swifter than eagles, stronger than lions. How are the valiant fallen in battle? Jonathan slain in the high places? I grieve for thee, my brother Jonathan: exceedingly beautiful, and amiable to me above the love of woman. As the mother loveth her only son, so did I love thee. How are the valiant fallen . . ."

8

David decided to build a magnificent temple, and to place within it the Ark of the Covenant.

He had fought many a fight and despoiled many a foe. He had accumulated wealth. This wealth he would lavish on the adornment of the temple. The Ark had been reposing in the house of Abinadad since the day the Philistines had restored it to Israel. To the city of David should the Ark be brought.

David and his chosen men went to fetch it. But there was a temporary hitch.

The Ark gave David the fright of his life.

The supernatural can be startling. One jogs along, believing in it, until it happens. And then, where are we? There are those who can believe in a miracle so long as it does not happen under their nose. All is well, if you can say, "This happened long ago." But should you say, "This happened, and not so very long ago either," all is well no more. To receive a cordial reception, the supernatural must be spoken of in a tense which is exceedingly past. We can even believe in visions, so long as they are respectably remote. But really, they must not occur to anyone we know. It's not the thing, it's not done. Better were it for you to drop an "h," than to declare you had seen a heavenly companion. About these sorts of things there seems to be no exception. There are few Catholics nowadays who do not believe that little Bernadette saw Our Lady. But at the time, oh, my word, what a dance some of them led the poor little child!

Yet the Kingdom of Heaven is immovable, and God's power, as it gently and quietly drifts over the face of the earth, lives down scepticism and levels opposition. Divine truth steers its course undismayed. It can survive chatter and the supercilious eyebrow. It can ignore the shrug of any shoulder and the smile of the man of the world. It will still live, even though (oh, most searching test of all!) a few good ladies purse lips rather grimly, while virtue seems almost to tinkle—just the tiniest bit.

Is there not a verse about something tinkling when charity fails? And can charity thrive among sour

thoughts, or dwell behind hostile eyes—eyes which imply "mad," or "liar," take your choice—nor do the eyes become more friendly if one really has no choice, absolutely no preference one way or the other.

And yet, the supernatural remains, and occasionally it is manifested in the very midst of us . . . a signal from Heaven.

"For Thou showest Thy power, when men will not believe Thee to be absolute in power, and Thou convincest the boldness of them that know Thee not. But Thou being master of power, judgest with tranquillity and with favour disposeth of us all ; for Thy power is at hand when Thou wilt."

There was about David's fear no scepticism. He was startled, but startled into a greater faith ; his fear was holy.

But surely, if ever in his life David was frightened, it was on this occasion. It happened as they were bringing the Ark from the house of Abinadad to the city of David. They were carrying it with due solemnity, yet one of the men disregarded the divine command concerning the touching of the Ark.

Instantly he fell dead before it.

Now David knew all about the Ark. Also he knew very well the entire history of the Children. Had he not sung of their ingratitude, and of God's providential care of Israel ? He had sung of Abraham, God's servant ; of Jacob, His chosen one. He had sung the story of Joseph, of Israel's sojourn in Egypt ; of the plagues ; of the cloud which God spread for their protection by day, and of the pillar of fire to light them by night. He had sung of the sea, rebuked and dried up, "and He led them through the depths, as in a wilderness."

David was familiar with every adventure, with every miracle. He was aware these things had happened ; yet he had not actually witnessed them happening. He *did* witness the man's death. He saw the almost trivial act of disobedience, and he saw the man struck dead before his eyes.

David was afraid—if God was going to observe iniquities, who would be able to endure it ?

For he had not heard that other song of love, though it was already singing in the eternal realms of Heaven : Christ's gentle voice speaking of the sparrows and lilies, and grains of sand ; and of a compassionate Heavenly Father, so tender, so solicitous, so merciful, that it makes one crumple up in a kind of unspeakable confiding lovingness.

Nor did this fear lightly leave David.

The mystery of the Ark—the power of God.

The thundering Lord of war, so near at hand !

David, as it were, stepped aside in fear. Not in his house, neither in his city, dare he place that mysterious Presence. In another city, and in another's house, should the Ark repose ; whilst watching from afar David would see what might befall. And God blessed the house in which the Ark rested. But not until three months had passed did David dare to approach. Even then he drew near with extreme caution. It was as if David desired to show his God that he both loved and feared him ; which the most, he himself hardly knew. But through it all his charming nature asserted his usual happy longing—to please.

He would do his utmost for the Giver of life and death. There should not be a moment's slackness or indifference ; and about the proceedings, one

finds David's customary output of energy and endearing humaness.

The homeward procession was to be a joyful one. Around the Ark were seven choirs and many trumpeters; before it, David, stripped to the waist, as a gladiator intent on the prize—indifferent to criticism or derision.

Those who carried the Ark had gone but six paces when David called a halt, whilst before the Ark he sacrificed an ox and a ram. The procession continued, David leaping and shouting. He "danced with all his might before the Lord." He might have been demented, yet his purpose was steady enough, even if his limbs were wild. And he achieved his purpose, this dancing Israelite. He brought the Ark of the Covenant safely, and in safety, to his own city.

King David, minus royal robes and crown, minus dignity, perhaps. Certainly minus dignity in the eyes of Michol; nor did she fail to tell him so afterwards, either. "A buffoon," she called him—ridiculous and despicable—but King David remained impervious.

Within his inner self so much love and fear, so much joy, that the outer self seemed of no importance. Was it worth while even to try and explain to Michol? Yet was it kind to turn away without an answer?

"How glorious was the King of Israel to-day," she mocked.

Could David hope to make her understand. He told her: God had chosen him to be King in Israel, rather than his father or any other of his house. The kingship was God's affair. He, David, was but the servant of the Lord; and if he, David, had

been glorious that day in God's sight, the King of Israel could very well take care of himself. The Ark had returned in safety—David lived! His answer was befitting a king: "I will be little in my own eyes," he said.

But concerning this story of David and the Ark, it certainly leaves one in no doubt. His behaviour is nothing if not human; and we love him accordingly.

At all times we love his engaging artlessness, his spontaneity, his affection, his deep longings; but on this particular occasion it is amusing to watch him being so careful, so much in earnest, not taking the smallest risk; his almost frantic desire not to be struck down dead!

One may smile, but one understands very well!

And what an appeal the human touch makes; whether it be to laughter, or pity, or admiration—we know at once where we are. Human nature is our bond with the rest of the world. It is God's intention towards us—since He did not intend us to be angels, either good or bad, but human beings—perfect human beings—it is just as well to acknowledge the importance of human nature.

To behave in a human manner is not necessarily good or bad behaviour; it may be either. Human nature may be degraded or sublime; human behaviour may be comic or tragic. But it is not a thing to be drummed out of court.

Sometimes one wonders, when reading the lives of the saints, why those who write them try so often to turn the saints into such unattractive, unconvincing people. Why spoil what is so tenderly and poignantly lovable? The saints are not trying to go one better than God. They are not trying to

improve on His plan, but only to live up to it. They are trying to discipline and purify what had fallen away from its original beauty through original sin. But they are never trying to turn themselves into demons or angels, or anything else that God never intended them to be. In the life of a saint we see the complete action of God's sanctifying grace. Sanctification does not dehumanize nature, nor does it destroy it. It makes more perfect what is already there. To sanctify life means exactly what it says, to make life holy.

Probably the saints never made a mistake on so vital an issue. But we ordinaries, in reading their lives, come across things which seem strange to us. We try to *explain* what we perhaps cannot altogether *understand*, and the result is not very satisfactory. It *is* a little difficult to explain what one doesn't understand. But when a saint is made to appear inhuman, blame the writer and not the saint.

The saints are up against big things. Eternity is within their vision ; and eternity is so vast, so tremendous, that most of us only catch, at best, but a makeshift shadow of it. We dwell among the little material pleasures of life ; we mistake pleasure for joy—we confuse many things.

We forget there are glories and agonies perhaps unknown to us.

Can we even guess at the saints' clear perception and horror of sin ? If we did, should we wonder, when they tear into little bits their own evil inclinations ? To an onlooker, the performance is not always a graceful one. At times, in the process, the individuals may seem to be also tearing themselves into little bits. But those blessed saints are never, even in their apparently wildest moments, trying to

stamp out of themselves their humanity—a gift from God, to be used in His service and for His glory.

When St. Paul urges us to put off the old and put on the new, he sticks to "man"—he is urging the supernatural negotiation between God and a human being.

But we can scarcely gauge the necessities of a saint. We know some things which help our understanding, but that is all. We know an elegant lady can lift her own dainty bag. And we know that it takes more than elegance to lift a ton weight; we know coats must come off, superfluities be discarded, and muscles trained to hardness. We also know that a navvy is just as much a human being as a dainty lady; we know their capacities are different. And we know, for a saint, the whole gamut of human possibilities must be nearing perfection. And so, when God lays His hand on a poor human life, we are not really surprised at the result. We almost expect to find in that life the flight and lightness of the butterfly combined with the strength of an elephant. Whatever we may find, we are sure it will be beautiful; *humanly* beautiful, and *humanly* lovable. For God does not disfigure His own work.

To correctly appraise a saint's life, or a saint's work, we must never cease to regard them as human beings just like ourselves; or, rather, just as we *might* be, if we *were* like them!

Human nature, God's creative work, His lovely intriguing present to each one of us, with its crowning wonder of free-will!

Human nature—irritable, selfish, contemptible . . . kind, generous, heroic . . . all these things belong to human nature.

You pick and choose, or you drift. It is inconceivable that a sane person would deliberately select the bad qualities—but thousands drift into them. Imagine two lists, one containing all the virtues, the other all the vices—all these things belong to your nature and to mine—they are at our disposal.

The saints draw a line through the ugly side, and devote their energies to the good side. They are in God's school, and His supernatural grace is their strength, and their light—their lifting up—their desire—their sanctification. That heavenly school is open to all. Ah ! let none ever turn away because the first glance may dishearten.

Were you to put your head inside a large telephone exchange, you would feel there was not an earthly chance of understanding. All the switches, the little popping lights, the numbers, and calls, and districts, etc.—you would not dare to turn a handle.

Yet a child of five, if once it be shown the right switch, with smiling easy bliss, by lifting a tiny finger, can start a message speeding across the world.

We really may be idiotically confident ; God will teach us what to do, if we humbly trust Him. But at His bidding, don't forget to lift the little finger ! Or how can His messages go darting about, either to ourselves, or to others ?

9

I do wish David had not fallen in love with Bethsabee. She was the wife of Urias the Hethite ; besides David had wives of his own.

Were I younger, I would say "let's pretend" he didn't. Once upon a time those two words conjured

up the impossible, dispelled all difficulties. But when we are grown up, facts remain facts, and words, mere words. And David did love Bethsabee.

Only one cannot help being sorry that David walked on his roof that fateful noon ; and looking down from it, saw Bethsabee, and saw that she was beautiful. Now, if he had only been watching the clouds, instead of peering below !

At a very early age I said to father : "I would like to be beautiful best of all."

He said, none too politely, "Thank God you're not." I thought, still less politely : "Stupid !"

Since then I have seen enough of the world to understand what he meant.

It is a pity Bethsabee could not thank God too that she wasn't ; and a greater pity that as a rule the love affairs of kings and mighty potentates run so smoothly. There must be a sort of dazzle about the word "king." Yet it is only a label attached to a man for his journey through life. The label might have been "crossing-sweep" or "city-clerk," and the man himself not so very different, either !

I suppose the title of King is to a man what the word Chippendale is to a chair. Without their labels neither might seem so impressive. Unlabelled, the Chippendale might find itself in the scullery ; but once labelled, it is kept polished in the drawing-room. Same chair.

When David saw Bethsabee he tied his label on very tightly, and he enquired who this beautiful woman might be. She was Bethsabee, the wife of Urias the Hethite. David sent for her, and she came to him. One wonders what her answer would have been if a mere hireling had sent for her ? Something pithy perhaps. But her eye caught the label, and

she beheld the King of Israel. A king riding his high horse. The kind, lovable David we shall see no more for a while ; not until we find him again in a flood of grief.

Easy enough for a king to dispose of the life of a superfluous husband. Just a few strokes of the pen, and the thing was done. The King wrote a letter : "Set ye Urias in the front of the battle, where the fight is strongest : and leave ye him, that he may be wounded and die."

This letter was to be delivered to Joab, and Urias was the carrier. Ah, but I defy you to "find David" turn the picture puzzle as you will. In some corner, upside down, disguised with cruelty and fierce passion, you may perhaps disentangle the King of the high horse, bearing the faintest resemblance to someone we once thought we knew ; but no—*that* cannot be David. . . .

Whilst besieging a city, Joab carried out the King's instructions. Urias was placed, as it were, among the dead. For whatever were the fortunes of war, Joab understood that Urias was not to return.

"Then Joab sent and told David all things concerning the battle. And he charged the messenger, saying : when thou hast told all the words of the battle to the King, if thou see him to be angry," etc., "thou shalt say : Thy servant Urias the Hethite is also slain."

And the messenger told the King how the battle had gone somewhat against them, that many had been slain, "and thy servant Urias the Hethite is also dead."

"The King said to the messenger : Thus shalt thou say to Joab : Let not this thing discourage

thee ; for various is the event of war. And sometimes one and sometimes another is consumed by the sword."

It was the King's pat on the back for Joab. And Bethsabee became the wife of David, and she bore him a son.

"And this thing that David had done was displeasing to the Lord."

10

Then Nathan went to David's help. He did not scold him, and he did not advise him ; but he told him a story.

"There were two men," he said, "in one city, the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many sheep and oxen. But the poor man had nothing at all but one little ewe lamb, which he had brought and nourished up, and which had grown up in his house, together with his children, eating of his bread, and drinking of his cup, and sleeping in his bosom ; and it was to him as a daughter" . . . and yet, when this rich man had wanted to make a feast, he had spared his own sheep, and had taken the poor man's ewe.

Listening to this story, the King actually thought one of his own people had done this. He told Nathan that such a man should be punished, having acted without justice or pity.

"As the Lord liveth," he cried, waving his label, "the man that hath done this is a child of death."

And Nathan said to David : "*Thou* art the man."

Urias ! Bethsabee ! One might say that the King was unhorsed. And as Nathan quietly proceeded, *David* crawled back beneath the King's raiment.

Then Nathan, his voice sounding terrific to David, accused the King in God's name :

"Thus saith the Lord God of Israel : I anointed thee King over Israel ; and I delivered thee from the hand of Saul . . . and I gave thy master's house and thy master's wives, and gave thee the house of Israel and Juda . . . Why hast thou despised the word of the Lord, to do evil in my sight? Thou hast killed Urias the Hethite with the sword ; and hast taken his wife to be thy wife . . . therefore the sword shall never depart from thy house . . . for thou didst it secretly ; but I will do this thing in the sight of all Israel, and in the sight of the sun."

And David said : "I have sinned against the Lord."

David penitent, and Nathan giving comfort ; because David had confessed his sin in sorrow, the Lord had taken it away.

Most of us, before we are twenty, realize that there is a penalty for wrongdoing. If we believe in God, we see reason ; if we do not believe, we have a good deal to say about bad luck.

Yet misfortune is not necessarily a punishment, it may be a blessing. We may often entertain these blessings, like angels, unawares. But we are apt to think the wicked flourish. In a measure, and outwardly, they do. Still, the flourishing wicked may have expensive moments when waking in the middle of the night, the clarity of darkness remembers all that daylight forgets. Nobody ever does wrong consciously without tasting Hell, whatever they may say, or whatever anyone else may think. The taste may gradually lose it heat. A daily consumer of curry can stand it hotter and hotter, without any additional burning within. A persistent disregard of

conscience will destroy the taste of Hell. Its heat waves will become unnoticeable—a carelessness creeps over life, followed by an indifference over right and wrong ; finally a complete and abysmal self-complacency. But at the beginning the scorch of Hell is there ; and in the end, Hell itself. Ultimately there is nothing flourishing about sin.

But David, from a wrong-doer's point of view, was a failure. He acknowledged it ; he acknowledged he had given occasion for God's enemies to blaspheme—he, the King of Israel !

The child that was born to him would surely die. For the mother of this child of David's had been the wife of Urias the Hethite.

And when David heard the child's life was despaired of, he cast himself on the ground ; he fasted and prayed ; he would not answer those who came to speak to him. As long as the child lived, he would neither eat nor speak. At the end of the seventh day, the wee thing was dead. His people feared to tell him. If the King had so lamented while the child yet lived, what might he not do now that the child was dead ? David heard them whispering around him ; he guessed what had happened.

"Is the child dead ?" he asked.

Then, hearing the answer, he arose from the ground. He washed and anointed himself. He changed his apparel, and going to the Temple, he worshipped God.

Afterwards returning to his house, he called for food and sat down and had a good meal. One gathers that the elders and servants were a little bit shocked at this sudden recovery. To cry while the child was still alive, and to have a wash and brush up and a square meal as soon as the child

was dead ! They expressed themselves with courtesy, but they conveyed the impression that his behaviour was disconcerting, however sensible.

David had once more found his God, and asked His pardon ; cleansed inwardly with penitence, and outwardly with soap and water, he answered with his usual simplicity : "Shall I be able to bring him back any more ? I shall go to him rather, but he shall not return to me."

Beneath the peace of soul and body there remained for poor David a deep touch of melancholy—accepting the inevitable—yet regretting those things which might have been so different. Something, alas, now beyond recall : "Shall I be able to bring him back any more ? . . . I shall go to him rather . . . but he shall not return to me."

. . . .

One can hear some people saying : "hard that, a hard God," and yet, were a pickpocket to steal their purse, they would hand over the thief (could they only catch him) to his deserts, without a qualm ! How much more merciful was God. David loved Bethsabee, and Bethsabee loved David ; and there they were, still together ; only a minute little atom fluttered off to play with the fairies in the moonlight or among the stars, or wherever such innocence flits away to. For we know the spirit is immortal ; and although we are taught that those who die without receiving the sanctifying grace of baptism cannot behold the Beatific Vision, yet we are also taught that being innocent of personal sin, they suffer no affliction for this loss and pass to an everlasting happiness. We need never be disquieted about God's mercy.

II

David and Bethsabee had another son. His name was Solomon—quite a celebrity! The birth of Solomon, and the knowledge that he would reign over Israel, were probably David's last joys. For the happy days in his life were over. In his closing years, David had ample cause to rend his garments.

One likes best to remember him before, as it were, anything happened to him; before he skipped along the valley with his sling—before he met Saul—before Jonathan—before he became a King; wandering among green pastures with his sheep, or playing his harp and singing his songs, and dreaming his dreams—beautiful with health and happiness and youth.

Ah, youth! 'Tis a wonderful affair for most of us. That sweet careless interval of time, vanishing before we knew it had been ours!

Yet the years of striving give to age a sublimity that youth cannot possess. It is easy to be sentimental concerning youth; but there is something better than sentimentality in the reverence one feels for those who are old. Whether a life has been well spent or not, old age is pure heroism. Often lonely; with none of the impetus and excitement of other days, to help a growing tiredness to leap ditches, there is generally something splendid and magnificent in age—there is always something pleading, for do not the old remember they were once young? Age has *endured* . . . so much . . . how much, none but the Creator knows—not even a Jonathan—not even a mother—none but God.

It is the heroic time of life.

Do you understand? We may be a little senti-

mental over David's youth, but we have not enough courage for the last years of his life.

You remember that sword that would not depart from his house? In his old age he was surrounded with conspiracies and troubles. Absalom, the son whom perhaps David loved best, was the worst. He killed his brother; he intrigued to possess his father's kingdom, till at last David was obliged to fight against him.

Yet it was for David more bitter than death. He was continually giving "charge to all the princes concerning Absalom"; and during the fighting David was not asking if the victory was his; his question was: "Is the young man Absalom safe?" and over again, "Is the young man Absalom safe?" But the sword was in David's house. Absalom was killed.

And David went up to the high chamber over the gate, and wept.

"My son Absalom, Absalom my son! Would to God that I might die for thee, Absalom my son, my son Absalom!"

It is like wringing out a sponge already wrung dry. Terrible because the cry will not cease; will it ever?

Too well do we know the high chamber over the gate where David wept.

Poor David, he did not get too much sympathy. You who have suffered, are you surprised?

Joab told David that he really must pull himself together. We all also know the sound of that, and what it means.

Joab did not leave David a loop-hole for doubt. David must stop his "Absaloms." It was not, according to Joab, fair to the people. It was not fair

to love those that hated you ; it was not even reasonable. It was, in fact, another of those things which are not done. Had Absalom lived, David and his nobles and his servants would have been killed, and then Joab supposed David would have been satisfied.

David stopped saying Absalom ; at least, he ceased saying it so that anyone could hear ; but what his heart said—again, no one but God knows. No doubt he thought over many things ! No doubt his God comforted him.

And so, farewell David.

CHAPTER XII

Should a millionaire ever give a thought to Solomon, he might acknowledge that to hold one's own against such splendour the millionaire must look to his laurels. Perhaps such a thought might lead to a more profitable reflection ; concerning Solomon and a wild flower of the field. Would the lilies have to reveal their glory to the millionaire after the millions were made ? or is there space even in business for a flower ?

Solomon's life stirred up a whirlwind of activity and a prodigality of spending. Firs and cedars fell by the forest load ; cedars became as common as the sycamores of the plains ; silver as plentiful as the stones of the ground. Horses and chariots sprung to him from everywhere ; a fleet of ships did nothing else but load themselves with precious stones, and all things rare, and unload themselves on Solomon's shores.

No wonder the Queen of Saba (alias Sheba), who was rather by way of being gorgeous herself, refused to believe these rumours of wealth unless she could see it with her own eyes.

On her arrival she owned to Solomon, quite frankly, that she had not believed all she had heard in her own country concerning him, and was delightfully surprised to find that "the half had not been told."

And now that she actually beheld Solomon's

display of wealth and luxury ; saw the house with its shining furniture, every piece of beaten gold (never mind the discomfort, just think of it !) ; saw the viands and sweetmeats on the table ; the ministers, their apparel ; saw with those own eyes of hers the *apartments of the servants*—well, really (if you will allow rather a free transcription of the original words), "You could have knocked her down with a feather !"

Whether the Queen saw Solomon's wives, one knows not. If she did, she must have found herself in a crowd. Over seven hundred of them. Solomon's reckless courage has not been sufficiently insisted upon. Talk about wisdom !

And yet, in earlier days, before Solomon loved "many strange women," he had been simple and happy and wise ; in the days when he was building the Temple ; and when he had taken for his wife the daughter of a Pharao. For whom should one be most sorry ? For Solomon, or the strange women, or the poor little daughter of a Pharao, whose name is never even mentioned ? Probably her name alone was the only one which Solomon could be quite sure about—this little nameless daughter of a Pharao whom Solomon had married—by way of a beginning.

Those were his good days, when he kept in mind the desire of his father's heart : the building of the Temple. That was, indeed, spending his money to some purpose.

And when it was finished the Ark of God was taken to the Temple and placed within the Holy of Holies.

Nearly five hundred years after Moses, with his little rod, led the children out of Egypt !

Assembled for the dedication of the Temple were all the ancients of Israel, the princes of the tribes, and their king, Solomon.

"And Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord . . . and spread forth his hands towards heaven."

He prayed for the children; a long litany of supplication for all their needs. The petitions are strung together with an iteration for God's most merciful attention: "Then hear Thou them in Heaven."

For careless prayers, distracted prayers, for tired and broken prayers . . . "That Thou mayest hearken to the supplication . . . whatsoever they shall pray for . . . and hear them in the place of Thy dwelling in Heaven: and when Thou hearest, show them mercy. If Thy people . . . doing penance, and confessing to Thy name, shall come and pray, and make supplication to Thee: Then hear Thou in Heaven . . . Whatsoever plague, whatsoever infirmity: Then hear Thou them in Heaven. . . When a man shall know the wound of his own heart, and shall spread forth his hands . . . Then hear Thou in Heaven, and forgive . . . and do so as to give to everyone according to his ways, as Thou shalt see his heart (for Thou only knowest the heart of all the children of men). Moreover, also the stranger . . . when he shall come out of a far country for Thy name's sake, then hear Thou in Heaven; in the firmament of Thy dwelling place, and do all those things, for which that stranger shall call upon Thee. That all the people of the earth may learn to fear Thy name."

In the midst of this prayer of Solomon's there are words which seem as a little musing of his own; as if his mind had gone back to the commencement

of these ceremonies, when the priests, as they returned from the Sanctuary, had been unable to proceed ; a cloud had filled the Temple, so voluminous, it was impossible for them to continue officiating.

In the old days, this had not been of uncommon occurrence ; but there is no record of Solomon having witnessed it before. It would make an impression.

He knew, well enough, what the Ark contained : the two tables of stone, placed there by Moses when he led the Children out of the land of Egypt ; but within the Ark was nothing else—at least, nothing visible. Yet Solomon also knew that, in some inscrutable manner, God was mysteriously present. He had been brought up in that belief. It was a part of the faith of Israel ; as the Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament is a part of our faith.

So when Solomon saw a dense cloud issuing from the Tabernacle and filling the Temple, he would be surprised no doubt, but his thoughts would inevitably turn in the right direction : it was the the glory of the Lord.

He spoke aloud his thoughts : "The Lord *said* He would dwell in a cloud."

And again later, during his prayer, the wonder of that special and indefinable presence seems to have absorbed him. Once again he speaks his thoughts aloud, and in his meditating there is a questioning amazement.

"Is it then to be thought," he says, "that God should indeed dwell upon earth ? For if Heaven cannot contain Thee, how much less this house which I have built ?"

The mystery of the Ark surely must be of great

significance to us ; so easy it is to learn on God's step-ladder. What a preparation for us to "His ways" in the Blessed Sacrament. The God of Israel is our God too. The revelation of the One true God, in the Old Testament, is a universal revelation. It is not diminished or nullified because the Israelites ceased—with the coming of Christ—to follow ; ceased to believe in His revelations.

God gave to the Children of Israel an astonishing protection : the glory of God within the Ark.

And later He gave them—how much more? Not only a baffling and invisible presence, but Himself Incarnate. Having taught them about Himself, having made His testimonies faithworthy exceedingly, He came to see them, to be amongst them, to be one of them—Jesus Christ—whose two natures, the human and the divine, made but One Person—God Incarnate. The Incarnation was for the Jews, as for all the world, had they chosen to believe. And when that short heavenly visitation was over, we find again the wonderful protection of the Ark ; yet transfigured, through the Incarnation. God became Incarnate ; as man to live and die for us ; as God to save us. That blessed life and death *bought* for us His distinctive sacramental life ; His beloved and intimate Presence in our Tabernacles. Gone now for ever, the remoteness and the vagueness of the mysterious glory of the Ark. Christ's life on earth made possible the Real Presence in *our* Ark. Coming spiritually, through Christ the God ; existing substantially through Christ the man. God's revelations ! Clear and beautiful—to be followed in simplicity and obedience.

Unfortunately there are those who feel quite sure they know better what God means than He

knows Himself. For when all is said, what *is* private judgment but a questioning of Divine Authority ; with its resulting confusion, and worse ?

There are those who will not admit that there is such a thing as divine revelation and authority ; and there are those who, whilst admitting it, insist on putting whatever construction they please upon it. Which is the worse state ? The latter is certainly the more inconsistent.

On any other subject most people see the necessity for authority and submission. All civilized countries have laws, and whether one personally agrees with those laws or not, one has to submit to them. Legislation does its best to cope with private judgment concerning the affairs of the country. We know when a thing is legal, and we know in law there is a very sharp line drawn when it comes to over-stepping in the matter of private opinion. The private opinion of a law-breaker must be nipped off. Yet a Plymouth Brother can hold any opinion he likes about God's Laws.

I wonder why one may use one's private judgment regarding the immutable and eternal laws of God, when it proves so inexpedient that one should do so over the temporary, mutable and local affairs of this world ? This is not far-fetched ; it is reasonable.

One has heard people say : "I have too logical a mind ever to become a Roman Catholic." It is difficult to understand in which way Catholicism would be in opposition to a logical mind. The Catholic Church accepts God on His own revelation of Himself ; and with that Divine Authority goes straight ahead. The Church accepts and believes in the revelations of the God of Israel. The Bible

is put into our hands and we are encouraged to read it.

The Church then very logically says we cannot pick and choose. If we accept divine revelation we cannot suddenly stop short and deny Christ; we cannot say one part is true and that another part is not. Then proceeding very quietly step by step—it comes to this: logically, either be a rationalist, and God a huge mistake—or—one fold, one Shepherd. It certainly is very comfortable and happy to be a Catholic. It must be perplexing to be a Rationalist, for if we have invented God, who has invented us?

And it must be very confusing to be anything *outside* that happy fold, when it comes to the life of Christ.

Perhaps we are inclined to ask our questions concerning God too arrogantly. Perhaps David shows us the wrong and the right way of asking in one of his Psalms. He makes his challenging appeal, his sweeping declaration of faith: "Lift up your gates—and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting gates: and the King of Glory shall enter in. . . ."

Then comes the stormy and combative manner of enquiry: "Who is *this* King of Glory?", i.e. What and who, in the name of all that is wonderful, does he mean? The answer comes promptly, seeming almost a threat. "The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle."

But David cannot let it rest; he wants innocent hands, and the clean heart, so that might and strength need be but love and protection; he seeks the purity of soul, where God may find recognition and a home.

Once more he flings out his appeal: "Lift up

your gates," remove all barriers between the soul and God, "be ye lifted up, ye everlasting gates," O immortal soul, be lifted up . . . a King shall enter . . . eternal glory, yours.

In humble, genuine seeking, with all truculence gone out of it : "Who is the King of Glory?" and coming from within, words whispered, as it were, under the breath ; encouraging, assuring, containing almost an invitation : "The Lord of Hosts, He is the King of Glory." One who is the God of all—One who will receive His own into that pleasant home of His in Heaven.

I have made two very serious mistakes : (1) Abandoning Solomon ; (2) Reverting to David. How to get back to Solomon gracefully, I don't know, and so I won't try ; but just get back.

It is only necessary to state that his beginning was better than his end. At the commencement of his reign he built a Temple for the Lord ; and later he built a house for himself. His end is obscured, one might almost say, muddy. Like his father, he was a poet. But his mystical poetry must have been written before his life of self-indulgence commenced. One imagines there may be many who prefer David's poetry. One is at ease among the words David uses. In Solomon's canticles I do not feel like a bull in a china-shop, but I do feel like a china-shop where something I don't like is smashing up everything I do.

Many may be the same ; unable to feel comfortable when words that are usually associated with our earthly loves are applied to heavenly love, and I am among them. It is simply the result of knocking about in a world which is full of abuse. One cannot easily rid oneself of certain associations. One knows

that *all terms* of love are applicable to God, and find in Him their first and truest meaning. It is we who have borrowed them, and too often bedraggled them. All love is from God ; and all love is holy until we soil the purity of it by sin.

But there it is—we have soiled it—so badly and so often, that it leaves one very raw and jumpy over possible misunderstanding.

Solomon's canticles can only be approached through prayer and must be discerned by the Spirit. They cannot be left to the senses unaided ; they are too delicately mystical. I do not believe that the hand of man can write about such things, though the heart of man may understand. They describe the life of the soul, and the soul *has* no language. To try and explain Solomon's words seems grotesque, almost offensive. Even a poet cannot *write* the song of a bird ! The best description is but a travesty.

And so it is with the song of the soul. It must be learnt in silence, and warbled to God alone.

. . . .

If you want to know any more about Solomon, you must read it for yourself. One becomes very weary of his wealth. After all, we like poor people best—is it not so ? We know exactly where we are when somebody says, "Can I borrow half-a-crown ? " We feel free and easy, within our depths. Do we not say to each other occasionally, in a wild flourish of extravagance, and pouring rain : "Let's take a taxi, and share it." Or in still more expansive moments : "You pay, and I may pay you back next week."

But to the rich one cannot make these airy confidences.

Well, Solomon asked God for wisdom; and wisdom he received. A gift from God, and he threw it away!

Wisdom is the greatest gift of the Holy Spirit; and because the greatest, perhaps the most easily abused. It is safer to be the most confiding village idiot, as far as God is concerned, than to fly on lofty pinions which are so easily mistaken for a flight of one's own. Had Solomon asked God for the gift of divine love, as well as asking for the gift of wisdom, what might have been the life-story he would have left for us to read?

CHAPTER XIII

I

Judging from really good hair-curling stories, and from the advertisements of films, the highest recommendation is "thrills." Taking this to be correct—and who could doubt the veracity of an advertisement?—the life of Elias the Thesbite could be guaranteed the success of any season; a thrill on every page. That is to say, there should be.

Of course, if I get wandering about—and when it comes to that, I dare give no guarantee—there may be many a dud page. I am, indeed, at this very second about to embark on advertisements; with thousands of apologies. But, honestly, it has something to do with Elias. It is his overture, before the curtain rises. It contains his "motive," his theme, his leading phrase; reproduced and varied until he disappears in a splash of glory.

THE OVERTURE

We smile at times at advertisements, but we seem to believe a little in most of them; for without our smiling faith and our hopeful dispositions, in what manner would advertisements avail business? No business-man consciously plays the fool with money.

If they make an outlay of thousands, they know that we are their justification.

Our capacity for belief in totally unknown quantities is colossal. So if anyone should say to you that they are incapable of believing in the supernatural, ask them if they have ever bought a bottle of hair-wash on the promises contained in the advertisement?—or anything else, on the promises of any advertisement?

If so, they are not incapable of *believing* in miracles, though they may be incapable of *discriminating;* just picking and choosing at random. To believe in the supernatural is an easier act than to believe in a deceptive advertisement; and in the long run, it is more practicable and far less disappointing. But is it not splendid, although we are such foolish things, there often lies in the folly itself the proof of our enormous capacity?

Elias says he would wish you to consider his life as one of God's advertisements. He begs, if ever you have believed anything on man's word, that you will show the same politeness and trust in God's words. The request does not seem to be unreasonable, even if the advertisements are slightly startling. Please remember his request while you listen to his story.

2

On the whole, Elias was a remarkably calm person. Around him lies God's mercy; before him, God's omnipotent power. He reduced faith to its utmost simplicity. God was Truth and Life. This was something so good and holy, that for Elias it settled itself and everything else. He saw no reason

for turning his relationship with God into a complicated misery, into an endless doubting, questioning speculation. He spoke strange things with wonderful assurance. He did not know how to hesitate. Even when he failed, he did not hesitate ; he failed outright. For the most part, he just said and did things that nobody else would dare to do or say. He begins by saying, quite casually : "As the Lord liveth, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to the words of my mouth."

He did not pretend to be weather-wise, like a newspaper expert. Without paraphernalia, or scientific help, he was able to make such a statement without fear, for the word of the Lord came to him, and he believed.

It was in this same heavenly, if unusual fashion, that he understood he was to leave the place he had foretold would be rainless, and to go to Carith, where he would find a torrent of water ; and there also the ravens would feed him. He did not carry with him a pitcher of water, or a handful of meal—in case ! He made no provision—it was not necessary—there would be the ravens and the torrent.

He went just as trustingly as some of us might go to Whiteley's tomorrow, were we told we should find a genuine bargain there. Nay, he went in a spirit of assurance which perhaps, at least in that degree, is unknown to us.

Bargains, racing-tips, and other certainties, have, it may be, overshaken our confidence. Too often have our fellow creatures proved themselves fallible —at times mere misguided idiots. Elias was outside this ring of uncertainty.

"And the ravens brought him bread and flesh

in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening ; and he drank of the torrent."

Next, we find him, in obedience to God's word, dwelling elsewhere ; and in his quiet way telling a very poor widow her pot of meal will not waste, nor her cruse of oil diminish, if she will make him some nice little hearth-cakes.

Elias did not at first ask for cakes ; he just begged for a morsel of bread. But when she explained that she had no bread, only a handful of meal, he suggested the cakes. She told him she was so poor, so very poor, that her intention had been to bake this small handful of meal for herself and for her son, that they might eat it, and die, there being nothing further for them to eat.

Elias said she need not be afraid ; she was to do as she had intended—but not to forget *his* little cake—in fact, to bring it to him before she commenced her own. One does not know what she thought of either his request or of his promise ; but she did as he asked, and no doubt she had her thrill when she noticed "from that day the pot of meal wasted not and the cruse of oil was not diminished."

Later, poor woman, her son fell ill, so grievously ill, he ceased to breathe, and died. She turned on Elias like a fury. The meal and the oil rose up as witnesses against him. Why had she ever listened to this doer and sayer of weird things—she had all along had her misgivings. Elias was to blame ; it was he who had killed her son. With his customary unmoved, yet decided manner, he said : "Give me thy son." And he carried the boy into the house, and up the stairs.

Then within that upper chamber he spoke to God

as to a loving and familiar friend: this widow had been kind to him, had given him food, had befriended him. Would God let her recompense be affliction?

"O Lord my God!

"O Lord my God!

"O Lord my God, let the soul of this child return into his body."

And God heard the voice of Elias, and the child revived. And coming down from that upper chamber, he placed the child within the mother's arms.

"Behold thy son liveth," he said.

3

"Now Achab the son of Amri reigned over Israel . . . and Achab did evil in the sight of the Lord . . . and served Baal, and adored him. And Achab did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, than all the Kings of Israel that were before him."

It was to this Achab that Elias had made his audacious speech concerning the weather:

"As the Lord liveth," he had said to him, "in whose sight I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, but according to the words of my mouth."

If Achab bowed down before Baal, let him apply to Baal for his rain.

Achab would like to have slain Elias, only he could not find him. Elias had disappeared; he was hiding away, by the torrent, with the ravens for companions. However, he returned presently to face Achab once more, and as he came on his way, he met a mutual friend, one named Abdias. How would it be for Abdias to go and tell

Achab that Elias had come back, suggested Elias. But Abdias was very unwilling. He did not like the suggestion at all, and he had quite a lot to say about it : He was an upright man and he had done much to protect the prophets of the Lord from the wrath of Achab ; but there were limits. Go and tell his master, indeed, that Elias was here. What sort of reception did Elias imagine the messenger would receive ? Every nation and kingdom knew what Achab thought of Elias. Supposing Achab did not slay the messenger—supposing he would listen—supposing he would agree to come to this very spot, what guarantee had Abdias that he would find Elias still there on his return ? Supposing in the meanwhile the spirit of the Lord had carried Elias into some unknown place ?

You see, it was common property that Elias was capable of giving thrills—in fact, there was no knowing what he might not do next.

But he gave Abdias his word that he would stand quite still until he returned.

And after all, those many suppositions were incorrect. Achab did not kill Abdias, and he did come to meet Elias, and Elias was still there ! For greeting Achab said : "Art thou he that troublest Israel ?" "I have not troubled Israel," Elias answered, "but thou and thy father's house, who have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and followed after Baalim."

One wonders if he commented on the dry weather or asked if Achab was tired of the drought and the famine, or if he would like to pray to the God of Israel for a little rain. Certainly he did suggest that he thought it would be as well for the people

to decide for themselves whether they would worship God or Baal.

Probably Achab *was* a little tired of the famine, etc., anyhow, he consented.

The prophets of Baal were sent for, and the Children of Israel were gathered together; and Elias came among them and commenced, as it were, his advertisement for his God.

"How long," he asked them, "do you halt between two sides? If the Lord be God, follow Him; but if Baal, then follow him."

The prophets of Baal numbered four hundred and fifty; the God of Israel had but one. Let two bullocks be given them, Elias said, let the prophets of Baal choose one for themselves. Let them cut it in pieces, and lay it on wood; but let them put no fire beneath it. "And I will dress the other bullock, and lay it on wood, and put no fire under it. Call ye on the names of your gods, and I will call on the name of my Lord; and the God that answers by fire, let him be God." And those proud and stiffnecked Children, those rebellious and troublesome ones, thought this a very good proposal.

Elias waved the untossed-for innings over to the four hundred and fifty.

The bullock was dressed, and the prophets placed it upon the altar.

From morning even till noon, they called on the name of Baal.

"O Baal, hear us." But there was no voice, nor any answer. Then Elias had his little joke. There are not many who would dare to joke before the event—not with their turn still to come. Easy enough to be facetious after success, but who,

except Elias, would have risked it beforehand? Happy and care-free, he called to them :

"Cry with a louder voice ; for he is a god, and perhaps he is talking, or is in an inn, or on a journey ; or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened."

How they cried to Baal, jumping about the altar in their frenzy ! But still there was no answer, nor did anyone regard them as they prayed. Midday was past ; the time of their sacrifice over.

With twelve stones Elias commenced to build his altar, inviting the people to gather near him, to watch him do it.

"Come ye unto me," he said to them persuasively, as if anxious to take these misguided Children into his confidence. In his heavenly fashion, he is the conjuror, turning up his sleeves, to show there is no deception.

Twelve stones he takes . . . "Come ye unto me" . . . 'tis God calling to His Children. . . .

In the name of the Lord, Elias built his altar. And round about it he made a trench for water, two furrows in breadth. He prepared the wood, he prepared the bullock, and he laid the bullock upon the wood. He said : "Fill four buckets with water, and pour it upon the burnt offering and upon the wood."

And again he said (listen to the decision in the words ; hear the gentle humour in the voice ; see the perplexity upon the faces of the Children) : "Do the same the second time."

"And when they had done it the second time, he said : Do the same also the third time. And the water ran about the altar, and the trench was filled with water," and Elias seemed very well content with his sloppy mess.

Was he not enjoying himself; it was an off-day for Elias, his "afternoon out"; no penances, no austerities; the great God would make holiday with His poor servant.

The people were silent, but their glances were eloquent: If four hundred and fifty prophets had failed, though their chance had at least been a fair and square dry one, surely this solitary prophet of God was a madman, with his buckets of water. Even if a stray spark, by some good fortune, should blow upon his altar, even if he set alight to it himself, what *could* burn, soused like that?

Elias good-humouredly read their thoughts; in fact, they were thinking exactly as he intended they should; and he too gave them back their answer silently and as eloquently; his answer was a smile. Are you satisfied, that smile seemed to say, that the bullock cannot burn?

Approaching the altar he spoke to God—save for the greater reverence—as calmly and as dispassionately as he had spoken to the Children.

"Lord . . . show this day that Thou art the God of Israel, and I, Thy servant; and that according to Thy commandments I have done all these things. Hear me, O Lord, hear me: that Thy people may learn that Thou art the Lord God."

Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the holocaust, and the wood, and the stones, and licked up the water that was in the trench.

As those unearthly flames scorched the ground and soared away skyward in the noonday heat, the people fell prone.

"The Lord He is God; the Lord He is God."

A muffled roar, a stifled cry from faces buried in the dust.

4

Contemporary with Elias is Jezabel. She was the wife of Achab. It was at her table that all those prophets of Baal sat. It was she who persecuted the prophets of the Lord. It was she—when Achab told her he had tried to buy Naboth's vineyard, but that Naboth would not sell—she who said that she would give him the vineyard, and without paying for it either. It was she who committed forgery and bore false witness, and on the strength of it, had Naboth stoned to death, and so, quite easily as it were, acquired the vineyard.

Once she was celebrated ; "a painted Jezabel" was the last term in wickedness. But this distinctiveness she has lost, dropped from giddy heights, become commonplace. She is out-of-date. She did not, at an odd moment and in any odd place—shop, restaurant or street—go through that rather finicky performance before the lifted flap of a bag, with mirror inset, of producing lips, eyebrows, and bloom in general ; but she did her best, and laid it on thick in the privacy of her own apartment ; thick, but not thicker—for there is a limit to what the best-intentioned face can hold. So one feels we have taken some of the snap out of Jezabel's reputation with our modern fashions and methods.

But one would wish to underline that it is merely a fashion and not a vice ; and it is no indication that the life behind the paint is lacking in any virtue.

5

"What doest thou here, Elias ?"

Elias was doing nothing in particular. He was

living in a cave, keeping out of Jezabel's sight, and feeling most utterly depressed.

What would happen to those wayward Children? Would they have the courage to persevere, or would they, under Jezabel's persecution, revert to the worship of Baal?

What would happen to Elias? If it comes to that, what was already happening to him? His world seemed tottering—he felt nothing but a cold desolate loneliness of heart.

"What doest thou here, Elias?"

It was as if some comforting presence paused at the entrance of the cave, calling to Elias to come out on to the hilltop.

Does God sometimes pass as near as that?

Elias looked out of the cave. Probably, without, a storm was raging; certainly within was the tempest of his soul. He may have drawn a comparison between what he actually saw, and his own devastation—almost a spiritual breaking up . . . a mighty wind which threw down the rocks of his faith; an earthquake which removed the mountains of his defence; and yet, in spite of his extreme physical and mental exhaustion, came a wonderful and restoring peace.

"The Lord passeth," even into that poor broken spirit.

"What doest thou here, Elias?"

As a silent sound in the soul—as a still small voice—as a whistling of a gentle air—God!

6

It seems as if some word had got abroad that the life of Elias was at its end; that he was "this day"

off to his heavenly home. For as he and his disciple Eliseus were journeying from Bethel to the Jordan, Eliseus was twice asked if he knew that this day the Lord would take his master from him. And as they went their way, fifty other disciples followed at a distance, yet keeping the two in sight.

They reached the river.

("*Looking over Jordan, what do I see?*")

How many times on that journey had Elias told the boy to remain behind; but each time the disciple had affectionately answered: "As the Lord liveth, as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee."

Was Elias fearful for the boy he loved? Fearful lest this sudden snatching away, this coming whirlwind of God's lifting up, would overpower this dear and young disciple?

("*Swing low, sweet chariot, swing low.*")

Impossible, even at the last hour, perhaps, not to look ahead, not to plan, to protect those one loves.

Perhaps it was part of Elias' plan to leave behind his mantle for Eliseus; be that as it may, leave it behind he did. And it proved to be for Eliseus the insignia of his master's faith.

As they stood there together on the banks of the Jordan,

("*Looking over Jordan, what do I see,*
Coming for to carry me home?")

Elias took his cloak and flicked the water with it.

Apparently no boat was available, and he wanted to get across ; also perhaps he wanted to give Eliseus some reason for remembering his mantle ; or it may have only been that usual calm and confiding touch of his. Who knows, with Elias so near to that fiery flight of his ? May he not already have been listening to some far-off mysterious cantering, hearing some fast approaching wheels ?

("*Swing low, sweet chariot, swing low.*")

But it was evident that Eliseus valued the mantle ; we find him, immediately after he had lost his master, trying and failing to re-cross the river, and crying, both for God and Elias : "Where is now the God of Elias ?"

And as that cry went up to Heaven, one might say that away in that stupendous and illimitable spaciousness of eternity, there passed *a look* between God and Elias—a loving communication—a transmission of thought—a comprehension so sure, so instantaneous, that we cannot grasp it or figure it in speech—and Eliseus, as in a dream, was walking back across the Jordan.

But for a little instant longer we may picture them, still together, as they walked and talked side by side.

Then came the *something* which separated them—a prancing light—circling whirlpools of fire—*something* which broke them asunder—*something* which engulfed the one in a blazing disappearance and left the other shouting wildly :

"My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the driver thereof."

Ah ! the Driver thereof !

("*Looking over Jordan, what do I see*
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me
Coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.")

Doggerel lines, almost abject in their simplicity. Yet perhaps you may be able, in one swift evanescent glimpse, to see straight through them to God—see the Driver, see the Kingdom.

CHAPTER XIV

And all the while the Israelites were, if not a diminishing race, a degenerating one.

They still had their prophets, and although the people were willing enough to make use of them, there was small inclination to listen to their warnings or to obey God.

They had Eliseus, a miracle worker, a disciple of Elias. Most worthily and trustingly he followed in his master's footsteps. And there were many other prophets, and occasionally a king, who "did that which was good before the Lord," but far more numerous were the ones who did "evil in His sight."

The Chosen People were crumbling ; they were dooming themselves to the inevitable catastrophe when their ultimate test came.

Nevertheless, there are both beautiful and interesting incidents which one must pass over reluctantly, with only a word.

There is Jehu, the mighty fighter, surrounded with chariots and battles. Jehu, the son of Namsi, who drives furiously. Jehu who, when his enemies ask : "Is there peace, Jehu ?" answered, "What peace ?"

Not for him could there ever be peace with fornication and sorcery. What had such things to do with peace ? And promptly he slew everyone

he could lay hands upon who bowed the knee to Baal.

From beneath the city wall, he saw Jezabel, peeping out of her window, all adorned to ensnare him.

"Who is this?" he asked.

And on being told: "Throw her down headlong."

And out and over she went, sprinkling the walls with her blood. Yet, later, remembering she was the daughter of a king, he sent word they were to go and see after that cursed woman, and bury her. But there was not much left of her to bury: a skull, feet, the extremities of those once dainty hands—"Is this the same Jezabel?"

There is also another window, opening to the East, through which an arrow sped on its symbolical flight, when the dying Eliseus and King Joas together drew the bow. There are the tears that Joas shed as he knelt beside the prophet, reminding him of that far-off yet never-to-be-forgotten day—"The chariot of Israel and the Guider thereof."

A soul's lovely memory when earthly light was failing!

"What is this confidence wherein thou trustest? Dost thou trust in Egypt, a staff of a broken reed, upon which if a man lean it will break and go into his hand and pierce it? But if you say to me, We trust in the Lord our God . . . ."

Then there is Ezechias, a good king, but who, when he came to die, found Heaven altogether too pleasant a place to go to; and turning his face to the wall he wept, beseeching the Lord to remember his good faith and, as it were, not to reward him too soon or too suddenly, but to grant him life.

Astonishing, perhaps, but he really preferred the wall to Heaven! And yet, are there many of us who can smile at him? Heaven may be bliss, but we cling to our present discomforts with remarkable tenacity. And it is not exactly our faith which is at fault. We believe in God; we believe in a life hereafter. But for us Heaven remains the *unknown.* We *know* our home, we know our occupations, we know our interests, our amusements, and our affections; and past that, we do not know.

Now God *is* Heaven.

Can it be that we do not *know* God?

If we look beyond this life as to the unknown, must not this be the terrible explanation?

From a priest on whom the light of Heaven shines undimmed came a message the other day, in a sermon. He reminded us that death "is the occasion when you shall have your first real holiday, and for the first time be really and truly going home —we are only travellers here, putting up for the night, and taking our departure when the morning comes."

Perhaps Ezechias was one of those poor risers who do not want to get up at the right moment, craving a little more sleepy semi-consciousness. Yet God sets the alarum for each one of us at the most merciful moment of all moments.

We anticipate earthly pleasures eagerly; can we not contemplate at least without dismay that flood of glory which awaits the soul in Heaven? Can we not sufficiently trust God, to hope also for that glorious freedom, for all those who have not *consciously rebelled* against Him? Surely ignorance finds protection beneath God's loving wing. Our conduct has so often the appearance—especially

when we are ill—of wishing to give Heaven a miss in baulk. We do not try to dodge a friend ; oh, if God were only our intimate friend !

Well, when good King Ezechias came to die, he piled up his excellent works, for all the world as if he wanted to use them as a barricade between himself and God ; and with much weeping, he prayed to live. Isaias the prophet came to him, telling him that his prayer was heard, and that he would live ; the King was comforted, but not assured. Isaias had said that in three days he would recover. But could he be sure that Isaias was right ? Ezechias felt he could not have a thing like Heaven hanging over his head for three mortal days. The uncertainty was too much for him ; he asked for a sign : "What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me ?"

How weary these prophets of old must have been of the continual want of trust, the want of love, so frequently displayed ; and yet what wonderful forbearance and patience they showed ; a good-humoured determination to make the best of a bad job. They spoilt the wayward Children, as one might spoil an only child.

Isaias said to Ezechias : "This shall be the sign from the Lord, that the Lord will do the word which He hath spoken : Wilt thou that the shadow go forward ten lines, or that it go back so many degrees ?"

Ezechias, speaking rather irritably, after the manner of the sick, said that it was easy enough for the shadow to go forward ; in fact, given time, it would not be able to help itself. He thought nothing of that, neither did he desire that it should be done. Let rather the shadow be "turned back ten degrees."

And the shadow on the dial retraced the line it had already crossed.

. . . .

I once heard a man become quite heated over this shadow. He could not, as it were, let it pass ; almost as if he would not allow it to move either way without his approval ! It seemed a personal affront, that an unsubstantial shadow should have been indiscreet enough to go the wrong way !

Equally nonsensical, he said, was that other story about the sun standing still.

During this conversation we were out for a walk, and our friend, in his annoyance, kicked a small pebble with his foot. With an upward angry movement he sent it flying into the air. Untrammelled, he exercised his little power. The stone obeyed him. Temporarily, he controlled the law of gravity which governed it ; he interrupted its repose.

One wondered why he should deny God the privilege of asserting His power for some definite purpose, while permitting himself this bad-tempered and meaningless interference with a stone.

And how completely he overlooked the fact that conceivably God may have a sufficiency of power to cast a shadow where He will, or detain a sun on its customary course.

Perhaps the sun might prove a smaller obstacle to God than the pebble to a man.

For it is beyond a doubt the pebble could have continued its tranquillity without assistance ; yet not at all beyond a doubt whether the sun, without omnipotent manipulation, could continue its course —methodically or otherwise.

Dare we so lightly question God's omnipotence? We who are unable to give a satisfactory answer concerning our own identity!

After all, it may be more nonsensical to dispute God's power than to believe in it. Even if it comes to believing in that long, long day when the sun most obstinately refused to set, or the moon to rise, while Josue, fighting for Israel, called a challenge to the skies, and God obeyed the voice of man.

CHAPTER XV

I

It is some years ago now since I first read the story of Tobias ; just before we tumbled so headlong into the the Church. Every day I read a chapter or so, and presently would tell Lindsey the story, serial fashion. Till once, waking with a headache, I was silent.

"What about Tobias ?" he said.

Was he really interested, or was it merely politeness ? He is such a very polite person, even to those he has known for years. The following day cunningly I talked of other things.

"How's Tobias getting on ?" he asked.

He *was* interested ! Not merely politeness twice running, surely ?

In a burst of pleasure I took all the credit. Young Tobias and the angel Raphael had not a look in !

Experience, both bitter and sweet, has since taught me that it matters infinitesimally little *who* tells the story . . . *it is what the story tells.*

Tobias (the father of the young Tobias of this story) of the tribe and city of Nephtali, was made captive in the days of Salmanasar, the King of the Assyrians. But even in his captivity he forsook not the way of truth.

In the days of his youth, surrounded by those who had ceased to practise their religion, he would go to the Temple in Jerusalem and adore the God of Israel. After he was grown up, with a son of his

own, still he remained faithful ; and his child was brought up to fear God and abstain from evil.

Then our Heavenly Father, who is never behind anyone in generosity, gave this poor captive great privileges. The King noticed the Israelite shared his scanty possessions with his fellow captives. Perhaps this conduct was beyond the King's understanding ; but the effect it had on the other captives was admirable ; also to the King it was inexpensive, and he knew the utility of keeping the downtrodden contented. So King Salmanasar willingly gave Tobias leave to go whithersoever he would, and to do whatsoever he had in mind. Also, the King gave him a present of ten talents of silver, to do with as he liked—yet probably not unmindful of that surprising fact that Tobias daily distributed to everyone, as he was able, out of his goods. In this case Tobias at once parted with the silver, giving it to Gabelus, one of his own tribe and in want ; taking from him a note of hand, though there seemed small chance that Tobias would ever be repaid. The note of hand was merely the routine of business—besides, why should anyone neglect even the remotest possibility of a chance ? Not one of the "seeds" ; not the blood of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ! Commonsense does not detract from kindness ; and Tobias had a good kind nature as well as tribal instincts. He buried the dead, at the risk of his own life ; for many of the Israelites were persecuted and slain in his days, and it did not make for safety to be seen burying their bodies ; nor in these cases could there be any note of hand !

And once, on the occasion of a festival, as Tobias and some of his friends sat down to the feast, his son, the young Tobias, came to his father, telling

him that one of the Children of Israel lay slain in the street : "and forthwith he leaped up from the table," unheeding the savouriness around him, and went out to perform his charitable task.

And then, one night, quite suddenly, he was struck blind as he slept.

What an opportunity for the sceptical Children to mock. Was this, they wanted to know, the reward from his God for his almsgiving and for his many other acts of charity? But Tobias rebuked them, saying : "Speak not so, for we are the Children of Saints, and look for that life which God will give to those that never change their faith from Him."

Tobias would not repine because the evil of blindness had befallen him ; he continues immovable in his attitude towards God ; and he would continue to give thanks to Him all the days of his life. With sighing and weeping Tobias prayed. Yet his tears were not those of self-pity, nor were his sighs on account of his own blindness. His prayers were for the Children, his tears for their infidelity to God, his sighs for their present captivity. He felt old and tired, and unlike that poor flustered King Ezechias, with his signs and his wall, Tobias hoped that God would receive his spirit in peace and let him die, should such be the Divine Will.

In case this happiness might be granted, he called Tobias his son, and gave him some sound advice and a few instructions.

"When God shall take my soul," he said, "thou shalt bury my body ; and thou shalt honour thy mother all the days of thy life. And all the days of thy life have God in mind. Take heed thou never consent to sin, nor transgress the commandments of thy God. Give alms out of thy substance, and

turn not away thy face from any poor person; for so it shall come to pass that the face of the Lord shall not be turned from thee. According to thy ability, be merciful. If thou have much, give abundantly, if thou have little, take care even so to bestow willingly a little. Alms shall be a great confidence before the most high God, to all them that give it. Never suffer pride to reign in thy mind, or in thy words; for from it all perdition took its beginning. See thou never do to another what thou wouldst hate to have done to thee. Eat thy bread with the hungry and the needy, and with thy garments cover the naked. Seek counsel always of a wise man. Bless God at all times, and desire of Him to direct thy ways. . . . I tell thee also, my son, that I lent ten talents of silver while thou wast yet a child, to Gabelus, in Rages, a city of the Medes, and I have a note of his hand with me. Now therefore enquire how thou mayest go to him, and receive of him the aforesaid sum of money, and restore to him the note of his hand. Fear not, my son; we lead indeed a poor life; but we shall have many good things, if we fear God, and depart from all sin and do that which is good."

Tobias listened and said he would do his best. But he pointed out that he did not know Gabelus nor did Gabelus know him; neither had he ever been to Rages, and so did not know the way thither (and whatever it may have looked like in reality, on paper it looks uninviting enough—a roaring, angry sort of place). His father assured him the note of hand would be a sufficient introduction, and advised him to hire a trustworthy servant, to show him the way.

And as Tobias left the house, standing before him

he saw a "beautiful young man, girded and as it were ready to walk." Tobias saluted him pleasantly and asked him from whence he came. Now although Tobias did not know it, this was an angel whom he saw.

It was Saint Raphael, "one of the seven who stand always before God, glorious, benignant, beautiful, the figure of His providence ; physician, guide and joy of souls. Companion of wayfaring mortals, and angel of their vicissitudes, by whom the tenderness of the Father, the healing of the Son, and the gladness of the Holy Spirit are ministered to wandering men, with the efficacious power of an angelic spirit, and the compassionate, pathetic love of a kindly human heart."

No wonder Tobias thought he had found the very companion he would like for the journey, and asked him if he knew the way to the country of the Medes ! Yes, this stranger had often walked through all the ways thereof; and he added unsolicited the exciting piece of news that he also knew Gabelus, dwelling at Rages, a city of the Medes.

Could anything be more fortunate? Tobias begged this godsend to stay where he was for a moment ; Tobias must at once tell his father—father was, of course, equally delighted ; would the stranger enter that he might speak with him ?

The stranger entered with a salutation as sweet as a breath from Heaven : "Joy be to you always," he said.

"What manner of joy shall be to me, who sit in darkness ?" Tobias asked.

"Be of good courage," answered the angel of our vicissitudes, "thy cure from God is at hand."

Tobias made no comment ; the possibility of the return of his sight rested on God's love and mercy ; the probability of it was not his concern. The note of hand was decidedly within his sphere ; he got to business without delay. Could and would this lovely stranger conduct his son to their mutual friend Gabelus ? The stranger said he would both take him there and bring him back.

"Tobias said to him : I pray thee, tell me, of what family or what tribe art thou ?

And Raphael the angel answered : Dost thou seek the family of him thou hirest, or the hired servant himself to go with thy son ? . . . I will lead thy son safe, and bring him to thee again safe.

And Tobias answering, said : May you have a good journey ; and may God be with you in your way ; and his angel accompany you."

Perhaps the beautiful young stranger smiled. Surely he smiled !

2

Does this leave you wondering ?

What about our chance acquaintances ? What about entertaining angels unawares ? And what about even those who may seem to us almost repulsive ?

I have met two strangers, both of whom left an unaccountable impression. I can scarcely say I entertained either of them. Certainly I spoke to the one, but received no reply. At least nothing direct or personal ; his few remarks—the repetition of two words—were addressed vaguely to the world at large. The other was a silent encounter ; no words on either side.

This speechless "entertaining" happened in Rome, and on Palm Sunday.

The Holy Father had, quite unconsciously, tied me, hands and feet, so that I was unable to obtain a palm (in Rome, you can imagine the disappointment). We met, my silent companion and I, beneath a little bridge which connects an outer building with St. Peter's. He was standing in the bright Italian spring sunshine when I first saw him, his back towards me. But as I approached, he moved a few paces, and stood within the shadow of the arch. He was tall and thin ; he wore the long black habit of a priest or religious. As I passed, he turned. His face was the personification of gentleness and friendliness and happiness—a smiling radiance.

With the slightest bow he handed me a palm, folded in the usual fashion into a cross.

Very gratefully I took it, and for a second stood there looking at it in dumb surprise. After all, I had got my palm—there it was in my hand. A belated politeness prompted me to say "thank you" . . . but the beautiful stranger had vanished.

I looked along the streets—nothing but sunlight and shadow—there was not anybody of any sort or kind in sight. I could see a considerable distance, further than anyone could travel in that short interval of time.

I felt unreal—space had unexpected significance—and our little world of dreams ? . . . and yet, a moment ago, how near had been reality . . . it left a trembling wonder.

I went to the nearest café, and had several cups of coffee—but the *palm* did not vanish—still it remained within my hand—and still it remains within a box.

My other stranger was less attractive, but none the less disturbing. You shared him. Actually, he came first. He too was young and very thin ; so thin that the few clothes he wore seemed self-sustaining ; as if there could not possibly be a human, living body beneath them.

He was very sick ; at least, he would have been sick if that poor frame had not been entirely devoid of sustenance. He was sitting on a door-step. Around him were a few curious children ; beside him a policeman, being most kind. But he waved us all away : "Go away, go away." His weak and impatient hands seemed to consign us to the uttermost parts of the earth. He was offered money, but that too he waved aside with his "go away." We were able to get him some hot milk. That he did not refuse. He sipped it as he could, his hands clasping and cherishing the warmth. Finally there filtered through into that remote solitariness—a state which seems to belong equally to the destitute and the dying—a familiar word. And because of it, some money was allowed to remain, perched precariously on his knee-cap. The froth was wiped away from the poor lips, the sweat from the poor brow. And we were obliged to move on, leaving him to his terrible isolation.

Perhaps, as he resumed his desolate way some passer by, moved to pity at the sight of him, might turn to look again—perhaps might look along the rain-swept street, in vain—perhaps those uncertain footsteps might have ceased to make a sound—perhaps the outcast might have disappeared from sight.

You understand I am not asserting that either of these two encounters were anything out of the ordinary.

Beggars are a very ordinary occurrence, although they may not as a rule reject a coin or in the last resort allow one to balance on a bone. However, this particular beggar may have been delirious—or can you suggest a better explanation?

And of course a kindly disposed priest may loiter beneath little bridges, in case some wayfarer should pass in a disappointed and palmless state, and at an hour of the day too when the streets are practically deserted; patiently waiting in case he might have the opportunity of making his bow and presenting his palm. Or perhaps there are many other suggestions—I have an open mind. I also have those two strangers, both of whom leave me rather at a loss. Not so much because I cannot find a satisfactory explanation for *them*. It is the impression they left behind on *me*, which I cannot explain. And you know very well I never have indigestion; why, I can eat lobster at midnight!

But the impression is haunting, and a little bewildering, and wholly unexpected.

Do you remember St. Francis and the leper? The fear, the kiss, the disappearance?

Nor is it out of focus to use a saint as a background. For St. Francis was not then St. Francis; he was Francis, just an ordinary young man with a preposterous capacity for enjoyment, and a habit of day-dreaming too impulsively.

Of course we know angels are pure spirit and therefore cannot be seen; that is to say, not directly, not as we see each other. Yet an appearance, something we can see, something within the comprehension of our limited senses, is possible. A manifestation of some kind, conveyed to us it may be in the shape of a human form, or it may be

coming as a glint of refulgent light—it may be anything ! but at least *something*, when God so wills.

We are out of our depths so soon ; anything on a different scale or plan, and we have lost our reckoning. We have such small perception. How can we conceive things of which we have no knowledge—unless the slumbering eyelids of faith slowly and softly open and the soul looks out upon that other and eternal life ?

But there it is. We are like Tobias, throughout our journey, we do not know. Not until it was ended did Tobias know. Not until the angel disclosed the fact; and afterwards, as if to verify the assertion, was taken from their sight.

And then Tobias *saw* the disappearance.

Without that actual, personal witnessing, would he ever have known or fully believed ?

Might not he too have been left making vague explanations, tentative suggestions ?

Actually to have beheld the human semblance—the mission on earth completed—disappear into that state of being which the senses cannot discern, must have been a great help, if somewhat of a shock ! For it would be easy enough for anyone to declare that they were an angel, but if it were not true, it would not be so easy to prove it by, as it were, dissolving into one.

Yet since we believe in angels, it is not too bad a practice, occasionally to "have it out" with them ; and to find out how impelling is our belief. It would, of course, be idiotic to go about imagining that every other person we met was, or might be, an angel. But really there does not seem much fear of anyone suffering from such a delusion for long.

Supposing somebody mistook either you or I for angels in disguise ; would not the disguise be so complete that the thought could not persist? Would not their disillusionment be very swift? Are we not too frailly human for such an exciting error? Well, now !

But it is comforting, and a great happiness, to realize that the angels dwell in our midst—we are among the angels ; we have angelic companions ; we can never be "a solitary speck in this huge creation of God." A very little application will teach the appreciation of one's own guardian angel ; and from the appreciation perhaps there might spring an awarenesss of that unfailing presence.

Without any speculation we can with security find the angelic hosts with God. Thousands upon thousands waiting to do His service—ministering angels, to defend our lives on earth. Claim one—claim that uninterrupted companionship—you will find a close friend, a confidant.

Directly the Tiger was told about guardian angels she said, "I'll have St. Michael for mine."

And when I pointed out that we may have to take what we can get, she said that if you had a preference, there could be no harm in mentioning it. A short while later, I spoke about her guardian angel.

"Saint Michael," she corrected.

A woolly lamb with a tiger's skin !

Perhaps St. Michael likes such trusting audacity, which claimed him in one sweet, daring, tigerish leap. For bound into the Archangel's company, she most certainly did, and then without more ado, snuggled there !

3

Young Tobias went forward on his journey, accompanied by the angel and followed by his dog. One fancies there was more joy in the dog's tail than in the heart of Tobias. He had not an adventurous spirit; he disliked novelties; his disposition was timid.

The very first evening of their travels, as they camped by the river Tigris, he had a disquieting fright. On going down to the river to wash, he saw a large fish. It appeared to Tobias to be making straight for him.

"Sir, he cometh upon me," he cried.

But it turned out to be a most useful acquisition. The angel told Tobias how to deal with it—to catch it, to eat it, to salt enough to take as provision, and to keep certain parts, as such were "useful medicine." So after all Tobias need not have feared. It was not the fish that devoured Tobias, but Tobias the fish.

His next upset was over getting married. They were to pass, on the road to their city in the Medes, the house of one named Raguel, a near kinsman of his father's tribe; there they proposed to rest for a while.

And then came this disturbing suggestion of the angel's: that Tobias should marry Sara, the daughter of Raguel.

But Tobias had heard some very uncomfortable stories about Sara. Her parents had wished the girl should marry. Diligently they had done their best. They had found several young men—seven in all—willing to wed their daughter; but on the wedding eve, all had died suddenly—violently—

it was reported they had been killed by a devil ; and there were those who were unkind enough to think that the devil might be none other than Sara herself. Now Tobias was afraid lest the same fate should befall him. But St. Raphael reassured him : the powers of evil can only prevail against evil-doers ; Tobias need not fear.

At the time when the elder Tobias lost his sight, and whilst he had been praying to God, it so happened that little Sara had been praying also. The death of these seven young men had made home none too pleasant for her. She had even been called a murderer by one of the servants ; and no doubt her parents had found the situation rather trying—providing all these prospective husbands to no avail. And yet, poor little Sara had not been particularly anxious to be married to anyone.

In her prayer, in spite of her misfortunes—as Tobias in the affliction of his blindness had done—she blessed the name of God. Tobias had asked God to receive his soul in peace, thinking it might be better for him to die than to live. And Sara too begged the Lord to remove this reproach from her, or else to take her away from the earth.

"Thou knowest," she continued, stating her case very clearly and quaintly in her childlike and beautiful prayer, "that I never coveted a husband, and have kept my soul clean . . . never have I joined myself with them that play ; neither have I made myself partaker with them that walk in lightness. But a husband I consented to take, with Thy fear, not with my lust. And either I was unworthy of them ; or they perhaps were not worthy of me ; because perhaps Thou kept me for another man. For Thy counsel is not in man's power. But this

everyone is sure of that worshippeth Thee, that his life, if it be under trial, shall be crowned ; and if it be under tribulation, it shall be delivered ; and if it be under correction, it shall be allowed to come to Thy mercy . . . because after a storm Thou makest a calm, and after tears and weeping Thou pourest in joyfulness. Be Thy name blessed for ever."

And in the sight of the glory of the most high God, those two prayers, rehearsed at the same moment, found the mercy they sought.

"The holy angel of the Lord, Raphael, was sent to heal them both."

4

Raguel considered his daughter's chance of marriage was gone for ever. So he was pleased and surprised (after the preliminaries—the falling on necks, the weepings for joy, etc.—were over) when Tobias said he wanted to marry Sara. Raguel consented ; nevertheless he had his misgivings ; one might almost say more than misgivings, for actually on the day of the wedding he had a grave dug—in readiness for the corpse to be popped into. His uneasiness was such that at cock-crow he sent a maid-servant to "see if he be dead." But she found them "safe and sound, sleeping both together." Immediately Raguel commanded his servants to fill in the pit they had made. He had been prepared to place the body of Tobias within it ; but he was not prepared to have Tobias asking for whom it had been prepared, and for awkwardly catching, across that gaping space, what might indeed be an apprehensive eye.

But the marriage of young Tobias was far from

ending in a tragedy. He was to return home, not only married, but a rich man. Raguel gave him one-half of all his possessions, "and made a writing that the half that remained should after their decease come also to Tobias."

Yet before they could return home, there still remained the note of hand. Eventually at the request of Tobias, Raphael collected it for him—then, homeward—Raphael, Tobias and a happy little Sara, with the half of her father's substance—men-servants, women-servants, cattle, camels and much money.

5

The parents of Tobias were awaiting his return with anxiety: "Why thinkest thou dost my son tarry, or why is he detained there? Is Gabelus dead, thinkest thou, and no man will pay him the money?"

Could it be that Tobias himself was dead? They wept together because he did not come at the appointed time. His mother was disconsolate; daily she went out searching all the ways by which he might return, until, with a real brain-wave (that even over-anxious mothers may occasionally be gifted with), she concentrated her energies upon a hill-top, from whence she might see from afar off, all ways.

At last she brought back the news: "Thy son cometh."

Tobias and Raphael and the dog came on ahead; Sara, the others following after. For the angel reminded Tobias they had left in this manner, and thought it would be wiser to return in this same way.

He reminded him also to take with him some of that "useful medicine," and not to forget to anoint his father's eyes with it.

"For be assured that his eyes shall be presently opened, and thy father shall see the light of day, and shall rejoice in the sight of thee."

The last to leave home, and the first to arrive, was the dog; he came running in before them, scuttling and barking with joy, wagging his tale, and all of a wriggle with excitement.

6

And Tobias anointed his father's eyes; and presently, as the angel had foretold, he recovered his sight. "I bless Thee, O Lord God," he said, "because Thou hast chastised me, and Thou hast saved me. And, behold, I see my son."

A few days later, Sara arrived, with all the servants, and camels, and cattle, and an abundance of everything; not forgetting that precious money received of Gabelus. And they had a great feast, and rejoiced with great joy.

"Then Tobias called to him his son, and said to him: What can we give to this holy man that is come with thee?

"Tobias answering said to his father: Father, what wages shall we give him? or what can be worthy of his benefits? He conducted me and brought me safe again; he received the money of Gabelus; he caused me to have my wife; he gave joy to her parents; myself he delivered from being devoured by the fish; thee also he hath made to see the light of heaven; and we are filled with all

good things through him. What can we give him sufficient for these things?"

One can picture them confronted with their problem: a beautiful and beneficent young man who seemed to expect nothing. The two Tobiases decided to offer their benefactor a half of what he had helped them to acquire. And the angel came to them when they called him; and quietly this stranger of once-upon-a-time, now protector and friend, began to let them into the secret of Saint Raphael.

Throughout what he said to them there is a gradual assertion of his spirit-life, his angel-life, and, as it were, the evaporation of the human form in which he had appeared. That assumed human form might eat and drink, but what were such things to his true life, sustained by God alone?

His mission fulfilled, he was about to leave them, but in the remembrance of this strange encounter they need know no fear—it had all been of God. As if he were quietly lifting them towards this terrific realization.

"Bless the Lord," he said to them, "give glory to Him in the sight of all that live, because He hath shown His mercy to you. For it is good to hide the secret of a King, but honourable to confess the works of God. Prayer is good with fasting and alms: more than to lay up treasures of gold. . . . But they that commit sin are enemies to their own soul. I discover then the truth unto you: and I will not hide the secret from you. When thou didst pray with tears, and didst bury the dead, and didst leave thy dinner . . . . I offered thy prayers to the Lord. And because thou wast acceptable to God, it was necessary that temptation should prove thee. And

now the Lord hath sent me to heal thee . . . and Sara, thy son's wife . . . For I am the angel Raphael, one of the seven who stand before the Lord.

"And when they heard these things, they were troubled : and being seized with fear they fell upon the ground.

"And the angel said to them : Peace be to you. Fear not. For when I was with you, I was there by the will of God : bless ye Him and sing praises to Him. I seemed indeed to eat and drink with you : but I use an invisible meat and drink, which cannot be seen by men. It is time therefore that I return to Him that sent me : but bless ye God, and publish all His wonderful works.

"And when he had said these things, he was taken from their sight : and they could see him no more."

CHAPTER XVI

The book of Judith.

"It takes its name from that illustrious woman by whose virtue and fortitude . . . and prayer" the Children of Israel were preserved from destruction.

Holofernes and his mighty army were upon the Israelites, and Judith delivered them. That is the story.

Valiant, and picturesquely so, Judith's courage was of the kind which strikes swiftly and strikes hard—the bravery of the V.C. There are many kinds of fortitude, and many women possess it in one form or another ; but there are those who, like myself, seem devoid—afraid when it rains—afraid of anything or nothing. Yet most women do not seem to bother much as to whether they are afraid or not—they just get on with it—and that is something wonderful.

If you want sheer gritty pluck and endurance, with all the picturesque knocked out of it, go to the park any fine Saturday or Sunday afternoon. Watch those youthful mothers guarding and amusing their still more youthful families. To judge from their appearance, you would scarcely think they had it in them. In spite of their absurd, worn-over high heels ; in spite of being shouted at, tugged at, and cried at by the hour, they remain good-tempered and pleasant throughout, and manage to drag home safely those exacting and fretful little people.

They receive no thanks, no applause ; they have no audience ; there is none to record their persistent unselfish kindliness. Yet perhaps there is a Book of Life, written with invisible ink, where many a forgotten story may be found ; and not altogether unheeded may be the devouring and exhausting demands which motherhood makes on the poor. We cannot all be in print. But we all can be—and willy-nilly, all are—within the view of God. (You remember Agar's startled exclamation when she suddenly realized that God not only lives, but also knows !)

The story of Judith is in itself brief. It is of a woman recollecting her beauty, and of her confidence in God. She was a widow, and the three years of her widowhood she had spent in prayer and fasting ; living in an upper room of her house. She was very wealthy and very beautiful. Her wealth she spent in bringing happiness to others ; her beauty she had forgotten.

Then came this affliction : Holofernes and his terrible army, sent by the King of the Assyrians to wipe out the tribes which would not submit to him. Many, indeed, did submit, thinking it better to serve the king than to die and perish, or suffer the misery of slavery.

But it was told to Holofernes, the general of the Assyrian army, that the Children of Israel who dwelt in Juda had prepared themselves to resist ; and he was transported with fury against them.

"Tell me," he asked with indignation, "what is this people or what are their cities, and of what sort and how great ? Also what is their power, and what is their multitude ; or who is the king over their warfare ? And why they above all that dwell in

the East have despised us, and have not come out to meet us ?"

Then his captain said if Holofernes wished to know the truth concerning this people, he should hear it. Long ago and long ago these Israelites had forsaken the ceremonies of their fathers ; and instead of worshipping many gods, bowed only to the one true God of Heaven. And around and about this God and His Chosen People were wonderful stories. A God powerful beyond belief—mysterious, yet strangely intimate. At His command the Israelites had left their own country and had dwelt in Charan, until a famine spreading over the land, they had gone down into Egypt. There they had dwelt for four hundred years ; there they had multiplied so that they could not be numbered, and Egypt grew to fear them. The Egyptian King had consequently oppressed them and made slaves of them. It was these Children in their bondage who had built his cities for him ; and as they toiled they had cried in their suffering to their God ; and their God had heard them. The whole land of Egypt was struck with divers plagues ; the Egyptians in panic cast the Children from them and from their land. Yet after they had cast them out and the plague had ceased, "they had a mind to take them again, and bring them back to their service. The God of Heaven opened the sea to them in their flight, so that the waters were made to stand firm as a wall on either side : and they walked through the bottom of the sea and passed it dry-foot. And when the Egyptians pursued them in that place, they were so overwhelmed with the waters that there was not one left." It was a long story that Achior told Holofernes : of how the Israelites had lived

in the desert where no man could dwell ; of how they had for forty years received food from heaven ; of how the bitter waters had been made sweet lest they should die of thirst.

Gradually, step by step, Achior drove home his point : no one could triumph over this people, except during those times when they departed from the worship of their God ; for whenever they repented and returned again to the worship of their God, He threw His power over them, "and whereso-ever they went in, without bow and arrow, and without shield and sword, their God fought for them and overcame." Let the King search and find out whether at the present time the Children were in a state of revolt or of repentance. If there were iniquity among them, their God would surely deliver them to the King, "but if there be no offence of this people in the sight of their God, we cannot resist them, because their God will defend them ; and we shall be the reproach of the whole earth."

Now this story received about as much success as if Achior had entered the Stock Exchange and had proposed to regulate the market through similar considerations. To be told the Israelites, a people without skill and without force, could beat Holofernes with his well-equipped and well-disciplined army, should they happen to be on their good behaviour at the moment . . . well, of course, such a statement was enough to make any army touchy—let Achior take his old wives' tales to where they belonged—let him be delivered to the Jews, and perish with them ; let him learn that there is no god but Nabuchodonosor and his mighty sword.

Ah ! triumphed the King, if Achior believed in

his prophecy, why had his face fallen and his cheek turned pale? Did he fear to be associated with this wondrous people? Did he anticipate sharing the punishment they deserved and tasting of the same vengeance?

Achior was taken near Bethulia, where the Israelites dwelt in the mountains; and there he was bound hand and foot to a tree. Later, the Israelites found him so bound, and hearing his story, released him and took him with them.

All the people were called together and they prayed the night long, desiring help of their God.

Whilst Holofernes surrounded their city and waited. What chimerical power of a boasted god would snatch this victory from him? He could afford to wait; it was not even necessary to fight this foolish people; he would wait until they starved! Without the sword they would be destroyed. They had thought their city on a hill impregnable—would God this time feed them again on food from heaven—was an empty stomach impregnable, or a parched throat?

And then came Judith.

Alone, and prostrate in her oratory she prayed. She did not underrate the urgency of the situation. She knew rather more about empty insides and raving thirsts than that comfortably awaiting general!

Judith had no doubt that God would assist her. Neither did she doubt the necessity of her own service. She made her plans, reviewed her assets. She recalled her forgotten beauty. It seems, then, this recluse could be practical enough when need for action came! A touch of commonsense—often far above the average—is found so frequently in

those whom we call mystics. Almost as if it were a dependable outcome. Perhaps long vigils, and fastings, and penance, are not altogether useless. Perhaps familiarity with God is not mere moonshine !

Anyway, Judith's judgment was sound enough. And out she went to the people. She spoke to them. They promised to hold out for another five days. But if at the end of the five days God did not come to their help, they would hold out no longer ; they would surrender. How Judith spoke to them ! How she upbraided them for setting a time to the mercy of the Lord—appointing Him a day, according to their pleasure ! Was that the way to draw down help from Heaven ? How she encouraged and consoled them ! "They must remember how our father Abraham was tempted, and being proved by many tribulations, was made a friend of God. So Isaac, so Jacob, so Moses, and all who have pleased God have passed through many tribulations."

"O God of Heaven, Creator of the waters, and Lord of the whole Creation : hear me, a poor wretch, making supplication to Thee. . . ."

She would leave the city ; she would go to the camp of her enemy, but none must question her, and all must pray for her until she came back. Returning to her house, she took off the hair-cloth and anointed herself (*O God of Heaven, hear me!*) ; she clothed herself with the garments of her gladness ; (*Lord of the whole Creation, hear me*)—bracelets, earlets, rings and lilies—(*hear me, a poor wretch, making supplication to Thee*) ; and her beauty again sprang to life.

She appeared at the gate of the city, an incomparable lovely Judith. And so she passed

through the gates unquestioned, the people marvelling at her smiling loveliness.

"The God of our fathers give thee grace," they said, "and may He strengthen all the council of thy heart with His power."

And that is how Judith set out to bamboozle Holofernes. And so successfully did she bamboozle him that a few days later she returned triumphant—his head in a wallet beneath her arm, her purity unsullied. A dexterous manœuvre—one clean sweep of the sword, and "behold Holofernes lies upon the ground ; and his head is not upon him."

In the stillness of the night the Hebrew watchmen heard the voice of Judith crying to them to open the gates. To Achior she showed the head of the unbeliever, who in his pride had despised God, and had threatened when Israel should be overcome that Achior should perish with them. To the people she gave a command : rush out, every man with his sword, make an assault ; there would be confusion when the Assyrians discovered their General was slain . . . the Children of Israel would see the enemy in flight. . . .

CHAPTER XVII

I

Poor little Esther! Queen Esther? Very well, Queen; but poor little Esther all the same. No swift strokes, no sudden rescues here! A little orphan—a wisp of a girl—exceedingly fair—incredibly beautiful. And suddenly there was thrust upon her a heavy burden—secrecy—and a difficult task.

In the city of Susan there lived a Jew named Mardochai; he it was who had adopted the child Esther after she had lost her parents. He brought her up with care and love. Yet when the King's ordinance was noised abroad, commanding that many beautiful maidens should be brought to his palace, among them appeared Esther, sent by Mardochai. Why this sending of a solitary little Jewess among the heathen?

The little fountain which sprang up when the Children cried to their God; the little fountain "which grew into a river and was turned into a light . . . is Esther, whom the King married and made Queen."

Esther was truly a living sacrifice for her race. Was it Mardochai's conscience which sent him daily pacing to and fro outside the palace, anxiously waiting to hear the fate of Esther? Or was there a keener anxiety in his mind? Had even then a hope for Israel stolen into his thoughts and motives? If Esther found favour, did he foresee help for his race? Was already that message which

later he sent to Esther, burning on his tongue? "For who knoweth whether thou art not therefore come to the Kingdom, that thou mightest be ready in such a time as this?"

Could the happiness of a Jewish girl be put in the balance against the probable destiny of the Jewish people? Mardochai did not hesitate: Esther was sent among the many to take her chance. You see? Mardochai would be found wanting in comparison with those young mothers in the park. Esther was not his child! Perhaps it needs the heart of a parent—a fierce, protective, loving heart, to wave away all other considerations. Those unsuitably clad young women—they could have taught him!

But Esther had lost her parents, and to the palace she went. Nor was that all; there was yet another terror added: on no account was she to declare that she was an Israelite. It was to be her terrible secret for many a month.

Poor little Esther, with her large, wide, frightened eyes and her silent lips—mute with their heavy secret! After twelve months—horrible time of loneliness and uncertainty—she was passed into the King's presence. She, as the others, had the privilege of choosing for this occasion her own apparel and ornaments—whatever she thought would become her most. But unlike the others, this desolate small person apparently had no choice; she was indifferent, leaving it for the attendant to decide for her.

Homesick, lonely, frightened, she longed only for her own people, her customary devotions, her particular little friends—even perhaps for her own beloved toys! Yet she pleased King Assuerus;

pleased him so far above all the other women, that he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen.

2

Aman was evil and proud, a favourite of the King's, and in great power.

As he came to and fro from the palace all bowed their knee to him and worshipped him as he passed—all save Mardochai the Jew.

One wonders if Aman had guessed Esther's secret. He must have known that Mardochai sent messages to Esther, and that Esther took those messages to the King. For Mardochai had discovered a plot against Assuerus, and sending word of it to Esther, she had told it to the King, and so saved his life.

But this state of affairs did not suit Aman : that an old Jew who would not bend his knee to him should be on friendly terms with Queen Esther—it did not suit his plans at all. "And he counted it nothing to lay his hands on Mardochai alone. For he had heard he was of the nation of the Jews ; and he chose rather to destroy all the nation of the Jews that were in the Kingdom of Assuerus."

"There is a people," he said to the King, "scattered through all the provinces of thy Kingdom, and separated one from another, that use new laws and ceremonies, and, moreover, despise the King's ordinances ; and thou knowest very well that it is not expedient for thy Kingdom that they should grow insolent by impunity. If it please thee, decree that they may be destroyed ; and I will pay ten thousand talents to thy treasures. And the King

took the ring that he used from his own hand and gave it to Aman—the enemy of the Jews."

"As to the money," the King said, "Keep it for thyself. And as for the people, do with them as seemeth good to thee."

It is quite evident that Esther had kept her secret well. The King loved Esther, and had he known, never would he have given his ring to seal away her life. But it is not quite so evident that Aman did not know. Had he not some inkling that Mardochai and Esther were hand and glove together; were they not both a menace to his power?

Quickly he despatched letters to all the provinces "to kill and destroy the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day," and these letters were sealed with the King's ring. Aman congratulated himself that these words covered all—even the Queen. Would not this rid him of that troublesome woman? Could he not now crush her as a moth between his finger and thumb—stop those flutterings backwards and forwards from the Jew at the gate to the Jewess crowned Queen?

3

Mardochai, lamenting at the gate, clothed in sackcloth, ashes upon his head, sent to Esther a copy of the edict, admonishing at the same time that she should go to the King and entreat for her people. So her lips were to be unsealed at last—but at what a cost! Whosoever entered the inner court unsent for was without further delay put to death, unless the King held out the golden sceptre in token of clemency.

Queen?—oh, yes, but how easily one finds the

poor little quivering Esther. A pitiful yet faithful message she sent to Mardochai : "Go and gather together all the Jews whom thou shalt find in Susan ; and pray ye for me. Neither eat nor drink for three days and three nights ; and I with my handmaids will fast in like manner. And then I will go in to the King, against the law, not being called, and expose myself to death and to danger."

If the prayer of Judith reminds one of St. Catherine of Sienna—and it does—surely, given similar circumstances, the prayer of Esther reminds one of Bernadette. There is in Esther's prayer Bernadette's simplicity, the same childlike confiding in God. Laying bare the tragic secrets of a desolate life, placing before Him her hopes and her fears—for Esther was indeed terribly afraid. "My danger is in my hands"—as if taking her life in her hands, she begged God to help her. She was to plead for Israel before King Assuerus, a heathen, a worshipper of idols, attributing his strength to their power ; but the Israelites had no other King but the Lord God of Israel, no other helper. King Assuerus might hold out the golden sceptre, and she, Esther, might be pardoned and live—but "give not, O Lord, thy sceptre to those who will laugh at our ruin ; for Aman has spoken against us unto death : Remember, O Lord, and shew Thyself to us in the time of our tribulation ; and give me boldness, O Lord, King of gods, and of all power. Give me a well ordered speech in my mouth, in the presence of the lion ; and turn his heart to the hatred of the enemy. . . . O Lord, who hast the knowledge of all things . . . Thou knowest my necessity . . ." and whispering her abhorrence—abominations—"the bed of the uncircumcised"—the glory of the wicked—the sign of

her queenhood upon her head in the days of her public appearance—detesting it, and wearing it not in the days of her silence—she had not eaten at Aman's table, nor had the King's banquet pleased her, and never from the day she was brought hither unto this day had she rejoiced "but in Thee, O God of Abraham, O God, who art mighty above us all; hear the voice of them that have no other hope; and deliver us . . ." and then the hurried little afterthought, the P.S. to Esther's prayer, and not without its significance either: "And deliver me from my fear."

. . . .

The third day drew to a close, the fasting and penance were over. Esther, in her glittering royal robes, stood in the inner court before the King. Smiling and lovely she stood before him, a brave little show of enchantment, her mind in a confusion of agony, her feet unwilling to carry her further; and away somewhere was a muffled persistent knocking—'twas the heart of Esther thudding against the ribs of Esther.

Three days and three nights without food or drink, an ordeal ahead, and a disconcerting mistiness around one, while from some remote distance words seemed to be floating to her, her eyes drifted to the royal throne—

"What wilt thou, Queen Esther?" Small comfort in that formal greeting. This, then, was the beginning of the King's wrath. Yet above the crowned King before whom she stood was the Ruler and Saviour of all. A fluttering cry went up to God. Clinging to her handmaid, Esther drooped to the ground—bright eyes closed—pale as a white flower, she sank till she seemed lost in the midst of the billows

of her flowing train, and her weary head came to rest.

But the thoughts of Assuerus were all of love, had she but known. With just a hint of mockery in his voice at such undue timidity, he asked again: "What is thy request?" and wondered because he received no answer.

"Queen Esther, what wilt thou?" Why was his little beauty so silent?

"If thou shouldest even ask one half of the Kingdom, it shall be given thee."

How still—motionless—eyes closed—could she be ill? And then the sharp, anxious change; he realised she was nearly dead with fright. In a second he had leaped from his throne and was holding her in his arms, reassuring and caressing her:

"What is the matter, Esther?" No trace of gentle raillery now. "What is the matter? *Thou* shalt not die; for this law is not made for thee, but for all others."

"Come near, then," he coaxed, "and touch the sceptre."

At that her eyes opened, but as she could not speak or move, he took the golden sceptre and laid it upon her neck, and kissed her, and begged her to speak to him. To-morrow Esther would speak; to-morrow she would tell the King her request; to-morrow she would prepare a banquet. Would Assuerus come?

Come? Had his love-bird forgotten? Half his kingdom if she so wished—a tiny smile—a glint of colour—well, then, would her admirable lord bring with him Aman to her banquet; and should she still find favour in the King's sight, would he to-

morrow evening fulfil her petition and grant her request?

Assuerus, still anxious and troubled, was all haste to give the order. Might it not bring more smiles and a deeper glowing pink.

"Call ye Aman quickly," he cried, "that he may obey Esther's will."

That lion of Esther's had proved a very tender one after all! But Esther had still a long way to go, and she knew it. While Aman had not the faintest idea how short was the way still left to him—not the faintest suspicion that tomorrow night would find him hanging from a gibbet which he himself had prepared—but not for himself!

. . . .

Aman was very well pleased with the invitation. The haughty, cool and aloof Esther was coming to heel, was she? The edict had, it seemed, put the fear of Aman into her.

He returned home merry, boasting of his riches and of his power. He had to strut it out: "Queen Esther," he told them, "hath invited no other to the banquet with the King but me, and with her I am also to dine to-morrow with the King."

His dreams of power rose high; the Queen was within them. Surely now he could command a little more graciousness towards himself and squash her friendliness to that old unbowing Mardochai. The recollection of the Hebrew darkened his vision. Suddenly he burst out in irritation: "And whereas I have all these things, I think I have nothing, so long as I see Mardochai the Jew sitting before the King's gate."

Aman's friends tried to soothe him, they offered

advice and suggestions ; the Israelite must first be removed. Let him not hang like a dark cloud over the joyful banquet ; rather let him hang from a gibbet. Let Aman order a great beam, fifty cubits high ; and then in the morning let him ask the King if the old Jew might not dangle from it. Excellent idea, wise counsel ! Aman would act upon it at once. And that was the high gibbet which he prepared—but not for himself.

4

Perhaps if the King had not passed a sleepless night things might have turned out differently. As it was, his restlessness made him seek diversion, and he sent for somebody to read the chronicles which recorded the events of his reign. And in this manner he heard again the account of the treason discovered by Mardochai and the plot to take his own life. He remembered now Esther telling him of this, but Mardochai he had forgotten. Had he ever been rewarded for his service and fidelity? He was told that Mardochai had received nothing at all.

Now, were you watching this story being acted on the films, you would be shown at this moment, when the King was questioning his servant concerning Mardochai, you would be shown Aman the Evil hurrying along through the courts to the King ; bent on his horrid purpose—permission to hang the Jew. He arrived at the King's door precisely at the second when Assuerus was cogitating over a suitable reward for Mardochai, precisely at the second that things took a turn for the worse in the

life of Aman—certainly a very bad turn, a sharp convulsion towards a tragic end.

Who was at the door, Assuerus asked. Aman. Most opportune—let him come in. King Assuerus wanted Aman's advice. What, in his opinion, should be given to the man whom the King wished to honour? Aman, already honoured above all the princes, supposed the King was about to give him some further mark of esteem. Such a man, he said, "ought to be clothed with the King's apparel and to be set upon the horse that the King rideth upon, and to have the royal crown upon his head. And let the first of the King's princes hold his horse, and going through the street of the city, proclaim before him and say: Thus shall be honoured whom the King hath a mind to honour."

Aman had opened his mouth wide; but the succulent morsel he had hoped for did not drop into it. Instead, the pill he had to swallow was exceedingly bitter.

One can imagine him waiting, all expectancy. At last he, Aman, would be honoured to his heart's desire—honoured as the King.

And then the astonishing, disconcerting reply; the words said as casually as if the King had been commenting on the weather, or any other minor event which did not concern Aman: "Make haste and take the robe and the horse," said the King, "and do as thou hath spoken to Mardochai the Jew, who sitteth before the gate of the Palace," adding with a touch of severity perhaps seldom shown to such a favourite: "Beware thou pass over any of these things which thou hast spoken."

And he, the first of the King's princes, found himself presently placing the King's mantle on Mar-

dochai, holding his horse, proclaiming through the streets : "This honour is he worthy of whom the King has a mind to honour."

One feels that the savour of life must have gone for Aman. Mardochai on the King's horse, and Aman holding the horse's head.

5

And so to the banquet, and his untimely end. Assuerus, when the meal had produced a comfortable warm glow within, again asked Esther what was her petition, that he might grant it her, reminding her that even should she desire the half of his kingdom it should be hers.

The little fountain which sprang up when the Children cried to their God ; the little fountain "which grew into a river and was turned to light . . . is Esther."

She said : "If it please thee, give me my life for which I ask, and my people for which I request. For we are given up, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. And would God we were sold for bondmen and bondwomen : the evil might be borne with, and I would have mourned in silence. But now we have an enemy whose cruelty redoundeth upon the King."

"Who is this," asked the King, "and of what power that he should do these things ?"

And Esther said : "It is this Aman" (say it in capitals) "that is our adversary and most wicked enemy."

It was as if Esther had let off a bombshell. The King had trusted Aman, and Aman had conspired to kill Esther ! He must think things out—decide.

Angry and astonished he rose from the table and passed out into the garden.

Meanwhile Aman seized his last chance. He pleaded for his life. But how? Who knows? Perhaps in real desperation, perhaps only in his own evil fashion, till the return of the King silenced him. Aman heard sinister words: "Behold the gibbet," said the King's attendant, "which he hath prepared for Mardochai."

"Hang him upon it," said the King.

. . . .

Esther's story comes to its happy ending. She was given Aman's house; and Mardochai was set over it, wearing the King's ring; whilst another edict went forth reversing the first one, exhorting the Jews, and exposing Aman's treachery. Upon the edict also was the King's seal.

"To the Jews a light seemed to rise; joy, honour, and dancing . . ."

And perhaps, as the new moon arose over that garden, "set with trees"—the sound of their rejoicings would reach Assuerus and Esther as they wandered together in happiness.

CHAPTER XVIII

I

THE first time I read "Job," roughly speaking, I only understood ten words of it. Subsequent readings, and I understood more; yet only through those ten words. As if the meaning of Job's life were contained in a few words: "Although He should kill me, I will trust in Him."

A message which he, as it were, wrote across the skies. Suffering and trust. So I must leave Job at that.

The other day I received a letter from a very dear little Peter. She must have looked into the blue, and found Job's hard, joyful words somewhere in space.

She wrote: "Isn't it true that joy is stronger than pain and suffering, etc.? One forgets one's sufferings in a time of joy; or feels they might have been twice as bad. I think in Heaven the happiest people will be those who have suffered the most. I can't put it into words; I can see what I mean, and that is all . . . it seems right that a human being should rise up and turn to joy . . . that suffering, and things that crush it, are only some means or other (Somebody else's means for it) because it is made by God for joy, and joy should be its very nature."

Suffering: not only suffering and nothing more! But merely "some means or other," a lifting up, a potential, if misty, joy! And suffering plus trust: a definite anticipation and realisation of a happiness

that will be possessed throughout eternity; the fulfilment of God's purpose, unthwarted by sin and the consequences thereof, a golden glory of beatitude—completion—the solving of the puzzle—the answer to the gigantic riddle of life. 'Tis here, or nowhere; 'tis this or nothing.

"Made by God for joy."

2

Perhaps it would be as well to group together with Job a few of the many other things I do not understand. Prophets, minor and major, are beyond me. One feels quite sure they were, so to speak, not beyond themselves—they were only beyond words.

"As He spake by the mouth of His prophets, etc."

At times these prophets are very clear; yet perhaps it is only when they are prophesying about the things of this world. When they become entangled with the affairs of Heaven, it seems as if one must be content to let them explode in their own way. One would hardly expect at such a supreme moment, a man to start talking pleasantly and quite intelligently about the weather, or the last political speech.

"The hand of the Lord was upon him." "I saw"—this is how one of the prophets bursts forth—"and behold a whirlwind came out of the north, and a great cloud, and a fire enfolding it!"

One can only stand aside while the whirlwind passes—being quite certain that the person concerned is having a heavy buffeting—if a heavenly one! He is rushing after the things of God—trying to get such things into words; one can nevertheless

guess at his meaning, or at least guess that he is amongst terrific things. "Brightness was about it," he continues, "and out of the midst thereof, that is, out of the midst of the fire, as it were the resemblance of amber."

Then with one wild leap he is over our heads and beyond words. For when a man takes to speaking of living creatures in the likeness of a man, of four faces where one would have been sufficient—of wings and straight feet, and calves' feet, and glowing brass—adding to such statements, "this was their appearance," impelled to try and explain what these faces were like, and yet driven to speak of man and lion, and ox and eagle—well, when a man takes to expressing himself like that, you may take it that words have failed him. *He* knows what he has seen, he understands; but if his vision be concerned with things which are at present unknown to us, namely, with the things of Heaven, is it not right and proper that words should fail?

We know, and can to a certain extent express the knowledge which our senses have in some manner or another conveyed to our brain. But supposing the hand of the Lord came upon us too; supposing we were lifted above our senses, would it be possible for us to convey in words the vision that had reached our heaven-swept soul?

When Ezechiel stated he had heard "the noise of their wings, like the noise of many waters, as it were the voice of the most high God," he is not stating anything which it is possible for the senses to perceive in the natural order, not, in fact, unless the hand of God had opened the way. So he rambles on about sapphires and amber and fire and shining; continually he falls back to the

words "appearance of," "resemblance of," to some familiar comparison, to this, that, and the other, to material and well-known things belonging to this life.

Finally he shoots it straight out. Let anyone understand or not—believe or ridicule—it is a matter of indifference :

"This was the vision of the likeness of the glory of the Lord."

3

You may remember we were once discussing the prophets with somebody who is not always patient, and is at times as unintelligible as a prophet at his worst. But the discussion ended in what might be called a monologue ; an outpour which admitted of no interruption : "Don't you understand, can't you see ? Take it *you* had something to say that would not go into words, wouldn't *you* be unintelligible ? Wouldn't *you* burst forth into a torrent of words, because there is nothing else to burst forth into ? You would know the wretched words were all wrong, but the meaning would be clear enough to you, because you had stumbled on to the inexpressible clarity of truth. And what use would it be for others, for those who had not beheld this vision, to persist in trying to explain what you had really meant, when you yourself knew you had been unable to express it, or make them understand. . . . If you want to say it has been a fine day—you can say it—we know all about fine days. But if you want to speak about the everlasting glory of God, and if you had even a fraction of an idea as to what God's glory really meant, you would do no more than

stammer as another prophet did—"Ah—Ah—Ah"—like a babe without speech.

Look at the Apocalypse ; look at space ; look at anything you cannot understand, and where are you ?"

. . . .

You have seen almond blossom against a blue sky ? Fireflies on a dark night ? A flight of birds, flashing in the sun ? The myriad sights and sounds of this world's loveliness ? But had you *not* seen, could even a poet give you the exquisite thrill of sight or sound ?

Yet there is another world, other dreams, of which the tongue of man cannot tell ! Music coming from unknown throats—strange palpitating songsters, singing unheard-of glories—flowers bursting through clouds, and blossoming in the blue. . . . God's fairy land where all things are called "wonderful."

And sometimes all the beauty and joy one cannot guess at comes breaking through the shadow of our senses ; a reality, bright as the sun shining above. . . . When a grubby London street became something more than a mystic country lane—the dull houses rising as banks of violets, thick with flowering scent . . . when before dawn a dreary, dark and rainy winter's morning broke into soft spring !

Just words ; for that is nothing.

None of these things happened.

Winter remained ; and the cold and rain were there.

One's eyes saw the flat houses, and one's feet jumped the puddles . . . and yet . . . and yet . . .

Some inner vision actually saw and knew !

Whilst the poor senses trundled behind, leaving this faulty translation.

Oh, the magic of God's whisper! As if some terrific magnet, suspended from nowhere, had found a useless, broken and lost bit of metal slopping about in the mud; had drawn it, and withdrawn it . . . till a celestial enchanted vision swung before it . . .

CHAPTER XIX

In the reign of Nabuchodonosor, King of Babylon, we find something as beautiful and as mysterious as the perfume of a flower : the Song of the Three Children, which those holy ones sang in the furnace of fire, praising God.

Nabuchodonosor had issued a decree stating that every man on hearing the sound of the trumpet must prostrate himself and adore the golden statue.

Now, there were certain Jews—Sidrach, Misach and Abdenago—captives in Babylon, who slighted this command. They refused to worship the King's gods, neither would they bow down before the golden image. They were summoned, and brought before the wrathful King.

Their very appearance must have been an exasperation to his anger. They came so calmly, so unconcernedly, as if they were already enjoying that cool heavenly breeze which later was to be around them amidst the flames.

Either they must adore his gods, Nabuchodonosor told them, or they would be burnt alive. They listened to their sentence with the same holy indifference.

"And who is the God," the King burst out in fury, "that shall deliver you out of my hand?"

They had no wish, it appeared, to discuss the matter with the King. "Behold our God," they stated, "is able to save us from the furnace of burning

fire and to deliver us out of thy hands." And then came the fine echo of Job, the same confiding trust : "But if He will not, be it known . . . that we will not worship thy gods." Though He should slay them, yet would they trust Him.

The furnace was prepared ; it was heated seven times more than was customary. For such defiance, such impertinence, such calmness, and such a God were not things to be trifled with ! And Sidrach, Misach and Abdenago, together with their coats and caps and shoes and garments, were cast into the fire. Their feet were bound. The furnace was in an uproar of heat, as per contract ; yet there were two unfortunate hitches : the men who cast in these helpless and bound Jews were caught in the flames and perished ; whilst Sidrach, Misach and Abdenago . . .

They were singing, and their song could in no wise be mistaken for shouts of pain ; it was full of praise and blessedness.

"Did not we cast in *three* men *bound* into the fire ?" the King asked. "Behold, I see four men loose and walking in the midst of the fire, and there is no hurt in them."

And this fourth person, this unknown quantity ? Accompanying them, driving the heat away from them, till in the very midst of the furnace there blew over them a clear life-given wind, covering them as with dew, "and the fire touched them not at all, nor troubled them."

Almost have we grown accustomed to the angels by now—to the sudden bright effulgent interferences from Heaven—almost to expect them at the crucial moment. Can it not help us to understand the so-called coincidences, the thousand and

one miraculous escapes of our own day? Perhaps we can let Gedeon and Tobias and many another bring more clearly to our blunted perception this beautiful and active spirit life of the hosts of the Lord.

Nabuchodonosor had been prepared to watch with complacency three bound men burnt to death, but what he saw and heard unnerved him. The King looking saw four figures; the King listening heard their song. Above the crackling of the fire, piercing the flames and pitch and tow and brimstone, it floated up, touched with the dew of celestial springtime, replete with an eternal joy.

All ye works of the Lord—all ye angels—all ye powers of the Lord—sun, moon and stars of heaven—all ye spirits, bless the Lord. Fire and heat, frost and cold, ice and snow, nights and days, lightning and clouds—let the earth and all things that spring up in it bless the Lord; mountain and hills, seas and rivers, and all that move in the water—beasts and cattle, birds of the air—let man bless the Lord—servants of the Lord, spirits and souls of the just—holy and humble of heart, praise and exalt Him above all for ever.

The three Children, singing their immortal canticle.

Then Nabuchodonosor arose in haste. "Sidrach, Misach and Abdenago," he cried, "go ye forth, and come." And they came out of the fire, and stood before him—stood, Sidrach, Misach and Abdenago, unhurt, unscathed—not a hair of their heads had been singed, nor their garments burnt—the fire had no power on their bodies—there they stood, before the King and the astonished onlookers.

Finally Nabuchodonosor broke forth into a kind of song of his own; he too would sing God's praises;

his words were rather peremptory, but that was merely habit—the habit of being a King.

"Blessed be the God of Sidrach, Misach and Abdenago," he said, "who hath sent His angel and delivered His servants that believed in Him : and they changed the King's word and delivered up their bodies that they might not serve nor adore any god, except their own God. By me, therefore, this decree is made, that every people, tribe and tongue, which shall speak blasphemy against the God of Sidrach, Misach and Abdenago, shall be destroyed, and their houses laid waste : for there is no other God that can save in this manner."

The outward signs of God's power had startled him into surrender: conversion of mind. But it takes more than an upheaval of the senses to produce what one calls, for want of a better name, conversion of heart. That finer, deeper conviction, when a man's whole nature changes as if beneath a magic touch. Yet it came to him later, after much tribulation. He wrote an account of it, and in his new found humility there is no longer any trace of the boasting King.

"Now at the end of the days, I, Nabuchodonosor, lifted up my eyes to Heaven, and my sense was restored to me, and I blessed the Most High . . . for His power is an everlasting power, and His Kingdom is to all generations. And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing before Him ; for He doth according to His Will, as well with the powers of heaven as among the inhabitants of the earth."

Surely such words are appropriate to any time, to any people.

Surely they must be dancing on the tips of our

tongues too? Or are they sticking in our throats? Or have they fallen into our boots?

. . . .

"Now at the end of the days, I, Nabuchodonosor, lifted up my eyes to Heaven, and my sense was restored . . ."

CHAPTER XX

I

DANIEL is memorable for quite a number of things—chiefly, of course, lions.

But he was a great man, and the shadow of his life as we watch it does not appear to grow less. God gave to him wisdom and understanding of visions and dreams. Indeed, he is quite a good illustration of what we call "the second sight." Besides interpreting the dreams of others, he had many a strange vision of his own, which nobody could understand, not even he himself at times . . . "for there is need of understanding in a vision," as he naively wrote.

It was Daniel who brought the elders to book and came to Susanna's help. It was Daniel who had his little joke about Bel ; and before going on to more serious episodes, there can be no harm to smile and laugh with Daniel over this absurd idol.

Bel was an idol which the Babylonians were very fond of—for more reasons than one. The worship of Bel was merely the peg to hang their greed on. Every day were spent upon him twelve measures of fine flour, forty sheep and sixty vessels of wine. Therein lies food for thought, and for something other than thought !

The King asked Daniel why he too did not adore such a wonderful idol. Daniel said to him : "Because

I do not worship idols made with hands, but the living God that created heaven and earth and hath power over all flesh."

But surely, the King pointed out, this idol must seem to Daniel to be a living god ; look at the quantity of food and wine Bel consumed every day.

Then Daniel smiled.

He would prove to the King that Bel had never eaten anything at any time.

The King sent for the priests who attended Bel ; there were a great number of them—and there were also their wives and children. They were told that Daniel was being uncomplimentary to Bel, and the uncomplimentariness cast aspersions. The King was anxious to know if Bel was not eating up all these expensive things, who was ?

It would be an awkward moment for Bel's priests, but they hoped to satisfy the King, and still continue to satisfy themselves. They suggested they should leave the temple, and that the King should set the meats and wines for Bel ; locking the door himself on leaving the temple and placing the seal upon the lock so that none could enter. In the morning the King would unlock the door and he would find Bel had consumed all.

Daniel and the King spread the meal for Bel, but before leaving and locking the door, Daniel, in the King's presence, sprinkled sifted ashes over the temple floor.

Next morning the King rose early, and Daniel with him.

"Are the seals whole, Daniel ?" the King asked.

Daniel answered : " They are whole."

They opened the door—the provisions were gone—the table empty—there was no deceit in Bel.

The King would have rushed in, but he felt a detaining hand upon his shoulder.

Then Daniel laughed.

"Behold the pavement, mark whose footsteps these are."

And the King saw among the sifted ash the footprints of men and women and children—and presently he was shown a private door beneath the table, by which those feet had entered.

Bel and his temple were given to Daniel, who destroyed them. And it does not matter too much what happened to those gluttonous priests !

2

It was Daniel who interpreted the writing on the wall when that mysterious finger traced the tragic end of King Baltasar.

There was no appropriate setting for this uncanny event, nothing that one would find at a séance where spooks walk—no dimness, no silence ; but feasting and carousing, and blasphemy ; the acclaiming of false gods, and defaming the true One ; desecration of holy vessels stolen from the temple in Jerusalem.

"In that same hour there appeared fingers, as it were of the hand of a man . . . writing on the surface of the wall . . ."

This devastatingly creeping thing was moving along the palace wall, over against the candlestick ; the King could actually see the joints working as the fingers wrote, and the sight gave him many unpleasant sensations.

He shook all over, his knees fairly dithering beneath the table. He stopped shaking, too weak to

shake any more, his knees glued together as with a deadly paralysis.

The finger wrote out its message—three words. Yet for the King there was no meaning in the words which were written there—unknown letters, sinister signs. Neither could his wise men or soothsayers decipher them. And the cry went up for Daniel.

Daniel—Daniel—let Daniel be called. Daniel, who knew no fear, but who knew all else—let Daniel come—let him tell the interpretation.

And Daniel was brought in before the King. His glance took in the disorderly company—the stolen vessels—the King's anxious face—perhaps for a second his eyes would rest on God's sign upon the wall.

But the King was whispering excited words—beseeching, pandering. If Daniel could read the writing, he should be clothed with purple, a gold chain about his neck. But Daniel waved such things aside (Just as that poor beggar had waved away riches—you remember?)

"Thy rewards be to thyself," he said, "and the gifts of thy house to another; but the writing I will read thee."

In that vast hall there was not a sound until the voice of Daniel rose in solemn warning.

"Thou Baltasar . . . hast lifted thyself up against the Lord of Heaven . . . and thou hast praised the gods of silver and of gold and of brass and iron and of wood and of stone, that neither see nor hear nor feel; but the God who hath thy breath in his hand . . . thou hast not glorified. And this is the writing that is written—and this the interpretation of the word. . . .

"God hath numbered thy kingdom and hath

finished it . . . thou art weighed and art found wanting. . . ."

The same night Baltasar the Chaldean King was slain.

3

Darius, the Mede, succeeded Baltasar. He appointed a hundred and twenty governors to govern his kingdom ; and three princes over these governors, of whom Daniel was one. And the King favoured Daniel ; he intended in time to place this especially trusted prince as superior over the others. So Daniel had a hundred and twenty governors and two princes against him ! But seek as they would to prove him worthless, he served the King so faithfully, that these men could find no suspicion of a fault against him : no carelessness, no dishonesty.

"We shall not find," they said among themselves, "any occasion against this Daniel, unless perhaps concerning the law of his God."

They set about their work craftily. They would bowl this Daniel out over his prayers ; for they felt certain, whilst there was breath in his body, nothing would prevent him from saying his prayers.

If only the King could be induced to sign an imperial decree which would entrap Daniel. Well they knew that any law decreed by the Medes and Persians was irrevocable. They approached the King with their suggestion : whosoever should ask any petition of any god or man for thirty days, should be cast into the den of lions. And when the King agreed, it was as if already they could hear Daniel's detested bones crunching.

Royal purple and gold one day—lions the next! We all have felt life's fluctuations. We may never have achieved purple and gold, neither have we been cast into dens; but we have had our ups and downs, and so we understand how transient are such things, and can appreciate Daniel's attitude.

On hearing of the law, he went his usual way and performed his usual duties. Three times a day he opened the window of the upper chamber of his house, and kneeling down said his prayers, as was his custom. And his enemies seeing him kneeling, making supplication to his God, considered him as good as gobbled. Nothing could save Daniel now—these laws of the Medes and Persians—he was beyond the King's help—beyond help of any kind.

Ah! was he?

And Daniel was given to the tender care of the wild beasts . . . and the lions made a pet of him. . . .

. . . .

Animals have their instincts; they know the moment for toleration and the moment for destruction; and when to this instinct is added the gentle influence of One who created them . . . .

Those same lions which let Daniel sleep upon their warm hides devoured a whole family after he had left them, with unimpeded healthy appetites.

Oh, no! these things are not a collection of fairy tales. Those who serve God without reservation have little cause for fear. Trust God and He will see you through—whether it be lions, or any other machinations of devil, or man, or self!

. . . .

There is a high dignitary of the Church who has shown us much kindness. He has sent me a letter,

written to him by a convert ; on a slip of paper enclosed with the letter, he has written : "State of mind as a convert and mystic."

I dare say you do not know, any more than I do, what being a mystic means, but we both know what it is to be a convert, in fact, as a family we are rather well up in converts.

With all due deference to our valued and much loved friend (loved so much that we have given him a nickname), if there is anything mystical in the following extract from the letter he sent, it is so far beyond me that I cannot even see it is there.

It appears to me to be a fairly straightforward comment on the meeting between Habacuc and Daniel, while Daniel was still with his friends the lions ; and so it is not inappropriate.

"Being a convert, I often think of Habacuc, the man who lived in Judea. He had prepared a meal for the reapers, and was taking it into the field to them when an angel appeared—which was probably a great surprise—and told him to take the dinner into Babylon, to Daniel who was in the lion's den. One can imagine his astonishment and confusion. 'Lord, I never saw Babylon, nor do I know the den.'

So the angel had to help him, and carried him by the hair of his head and took him there, and put him down in front of the lions' den. And Habacuc told Daniel to eat the meat God had sent him ; and Daniel thanked God, remembering He never forsakes those who trust Him (what a beautiful thanksgiving). It does not say if Daniel and Habacuc had time to talk over these wonderful things or not—perhaps Habacuc found it difficult to speak about such heavenly happenings—or he may have been

longing to tell Daniel about it all—anyway, the angel came for him, and took him home again ; and then he would have to face the dinnerless reapers—whatever would he say to them ? If he told them the truth, they would probably not believe him—and they might be a little angry about the dinner, and expect some sort of explanation—whatever would he say ? I have often thought of this story, which I read just before I became a Catholic.

How bewildered Habacuc must have been—he had not heard of Babylon or of the lions' den, and yet he found himself there—and the thought of those waiting reapers would keep floating about in the back of his mind, although he would be so intensely happy with the angel that it would be difficult for him to bother much about them.

But is not that roughly the story of any convert who from utter darkness enters into the light and love and wonder and glory of the Church ?

Figuratively, one often has no dinner for the reapers, and no reasonable (from this world's point of view) explanation.

Lost in wonder and amazing joy, those at home wanting all sorts of things from me . . . whilst I . . . oh, I have often thought of Habacuc."

"Because out of prison and chains a man sometimes cometh forth to a kingdom."

Is it necessary to tell you that Daniel came out alive ?

CHAPTER XXI

Monsignor is dead. And so this small book will remain unfinished. Yet it is finished, because no more is coming. I would rather leave it where he left it. Whenever I wrote a chapter, you and he read it, and he was, as you know, my censor. All that is written he passed—and should it ever come to other eyes than yours, it will be only following out his wish. He begged me to publish it, if there could be found anyone kind enough to do so !

Monsignor is buried in the cemetery at St. Augustine's Priory. He loved the Priory ; to him it was a most blessed and delectable spot. So there he lies where he wished to be.

His death has been a terrible interruption to life—yet a spiritual education, though very devastating. His dying seemed as the passing of a procession : people praying on either side, whilst his soul moved slowly along, heavenward. Everyone knows Monsignor was holy ; holiness at its sweetest and best. But the innate holiness of God is something beyond our grasping, and to watch that final purification of God was to witness the Eternal One teaching and perfecting a soul.

"Blessed be the pure—for they shall see God."

It is a hard thing to be ill, full of discomfort ; and yet how trivial are such things compared with the endless joy that awaits those who have been purified during their life on earth.

I was not for going to the Requiem Mass. I could not face that leave-taking of the familiar figure from the Cathedral. My tendencies are weak, generally those of a coward. It was Lindsey who showed me the way, as he so often does. But in this case it seemed strange. He said : "If your Church teaches that a Requiem Mass is the right time and place for such prayers, I think you should go." And so, as you know, we went. You and I and Arthur and Lindsey. It was like a nightmare. It was like a perfect dream—like the serenity of God.

There was the coffin—tired feet were resting—looking, as it were, for the first time towards the place they had passed so often—the Altar. Outside the coffin was Monsignor's beretta. It looked so lonely, so solitary—no kind face beneath it—no gentle hand to raise it at the name of Jesus—a thing forlorn—left behind—as if its owner had gone away and forgotten to take it with him. Truly a symbol that work was over—the trappings of this life done with . . . the soul fled to everlasting joy.

And the Mass went on. . . .

Last year, Monsignor was staying at the Priory, and for ten days, while he was there, I stayed in Newton, spending the afternoon with him and returning after benediction. Memories, memories—everything concerning Monsignor is nothing more than that now—yet I knew at the time it would never be again.

Pleasant recollections of all kinds, and how many of them ! Rome—once upon a time, Rome ! Those difficult streets to negotiate with Monsignor, who never would look where he was going ! And always, wherever one was, whether it was Rome or England—always Monsignor to tell things to—

before his desertion—before this terrible interruption of his death.

And the Mass went on and on . . .

One's mind floated and drifted; but there remained always, as if to deny one's thoughts, that small coffin—'twas as if somebody were standing very still, very silent. Our Monsignor (for one was incapable of thinking otherwise) waiting patiently until this last ceremony of his was completed. Yet there was a finality beyond thought; an irrevocable closing of a door—so secretly—so silently—so tightly.

The music rose and fell, undulations of sound. Monsignor had often told me how much he enjoyed the music in the Cathedral—well, there it was—all his very own and Christ's. He knows now how much more beautiful is the heavenly music, with its silent engulfing of the skies—the harmony of life everlasting; and no tears to wipe away.

The last time I saw Monsignor—a few hours before his death (he died in the early morning, and I saw him the evening before), he told me that he would thank God through all eternity for the great happiness granted to him towards the close of his life. He was referring to his Mass on February 11th, 1923, and to all the subsequent happenings consequent on that joyous event.

The Mass was finished. The Cardinal Archbishop was passing around the coffin. The Antiphon was being sung, bringing a peace which was certainly not of this world. It was as if one reached up and found with surprise and gratitude that God was still there. It was sung slowly and very quietly . . . a whispering to the dead . . . some secret and last communication . . .

"May the angels lead thee into Paradise :
May the martyrs receive thee at thy coming,
And bring thee into the holy city—
May the choir of angels receive thee,
And with Lazarus, who once was poor,
Mayest thou have eternal rest."

Someone came forward and placed three wreaths over Monsignor. We did not know whether it was correct or not to send flowers when a priest died. But we loved him, and in loving memory we sent them. One from you and Arthur—blue and mauve irises. One from Lindsey and me—white lilies and white tulips, opened like pale water flowers. And one from Peter and the Tiger—a sheaf of golden daffodils.

As the Dead March struck one cold and helpless, the sun broke out ; it streamed through the windows; it shone like living flames on the big candlesticks ; and as the coffin passed down the aisle, it caught those dancing daffodils, nodding and swinging to the rhythm of the bearers. It seemed to me as if in those yellow spring-time flowers, the gay, brave young spirit of the Tiger was accompanying Monsignor . . . curtseying, beckoning, and waving him farewell—a golden peal of glory ringing at the gates of Heaven.

. . . .

Those days are over. Out of them comes to you "your-my" book. In a sense it reminds me of those rock gardens we have so often seen together at the fortnightly flower shows; such a solid foundation for such tiny affairs; such foolish little flowers, creeping and crawling around and about ;

clinging and twisting and twining into every nook and corner, and yet never, because of their diminutiveness, conveying the slightest message of the strength of the rock.

God is the rock, which is exceedingly satisfactory ; but what about the foolish little words, creeping and crawling round about Him ? Certain it is—yes, most surely—He is great enough and wonderful enough to take care of Himself without any fussing on my part ; neither my espièglerie nor my incapacities can harm Him.

"Shall the axe boast itself against him that cutteth with it ? Or shall the saw exalt itself against him by whom it is drawn ? Under His glory shall be kindled a burning as it were the burning of fire."

The God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob—our God.

"May God be merciful unto us and bless us : May He show the light of His countenance upon us and be merciful unto us. That we may know Thy way upon earth : Thy salvation among all nations. May God, even our own God, bless us ; yea may God bless us."

"Wherefore, lift up the hands which hang down . . . and make straight steps with your feet . . ." God alone knows the extent to which my hands are hanging down . . . and as to my feet . . .?

The litter of papers is tidied up—the table is empty—except for a neat little pile of typewritten chapters, which seem never to have known the aches and pain of that other poor MS. And only now—lingering on because I cannot bear to finish—do I realize how much these people of whom I have tried to write have, during the last year, moved about in my life—or, more correctly, I in theirs.

"What I spent I had,
What I saved I lost,
What I gave I have."

You will not have forgotten where and how we first heard those lines.

Do you remember the prophet who, when words failed him, stammered out three "Ah's"? It is not so much that words are failing me, as that the holiday I invited you to is ended, and I *must* stop.

But in place of the prophet's three "Ah's," may I stammer out three "If's"?

Three unfinished questions—while as to the answers . . . away and beyond this little room . . .

If—you have enjoyed our festival . . . ?

If—you forgive the occasional jingle of the jester's bells . . . ?

If to-day you shall hear His voice?

Yet, after all, I am driven by that great solitariness which surrounds us all, to the prophet's inarticulate sigh:

Ah! Ah! Ah!

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